TRAITOR OR PATRIOT

BY

MARY C. BOWSELL

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RUMSEY'S GUILT REVEALED TO THE KING

Traitor or Patriot?

A Tale of the Rye-House Plot

BY

MARY C. ROWSELL

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PREFACE.

THIS story is for the most part a romantic rendering of a very obscure episode in the story of the reign of Charles the Second. It does not pretend to more historical accuracy than belongs to other romances which are spun from a thread of fact on a spool of fiction, but it may be mentioned that the scenes and the actors are mostly real, and it should be remembered that the story of the Rye-house Plot (1683) as told in authentic records is strangely vague. That there *was* a plot—that the King's house at Newmarket was burnt, or at least that part of it containing the royal apartments was on fire—and that Charles escaped, are the certain points of the story. The details are left very much to imagination, and as fancy is free, "one story is good till another is told."

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TRAITOR OR PATRIOT?

A TALE OF THE RYE-HOUSE PLOT.

CHAPTER I.

"QUEEN RUTH."

AY-DAY! None of your raw, drizzling, windy, nineteenth-century May-days, when folks, chilled to their marrow-bones, draw their old cloaks and coats about them and beg for a cozy blaze in place of the smart new "ornament for the fire-stove." No; a right-down, unmistakable, fine old English first of May, with a fine old English sun, gradually assuming roseate hues, and setting the heavens in a glow as he slopes westward behind the trees of Epping Forest, casting long shadows athwart the smooth-shaven grass-plot which carpets the forecourt of a fine old many-gabled Hertfordshire farm-house; while his dying brilliancy gilds the broken summits of the ruined gate-house overshadowing it, and illumines the fresh tints of the cowslips, and earliest summer

flower-garlands, festooned with many a gay ribbon-knot about a May-pole towering to the cloudless sky. Around this a group of young folks are merrily footing it to the tune of "Phillida flouts me," which the fifers and fiddlers, mounted on a table beneath the big spreading yew-tree, are braying out with a will.

And the Queen of the May? Well, there she is; that —. But no; what differs more than taste on these points? and you must decide for yourself concerning the value of her claims on beauty. To you it may seem that many of those bright eyes, and laughing lips, and all the rest of it, rival the charms of Queen Ruth, Young Mistress Ruth Rumbold, the only child of Master Richard Rumbold of the Rye House, whose embattled gate-tower roof just shows yonder through the trees, with its gilded vane gleaming in the setting sun-rays. But then you do not know Ruth as all these good people have known her for fifteen years turned last Martlemas-tide, when she was left a motherless three months old babe to the care of Nurse Maudlin—Maudlin Sweetapple. Therefore it is hardly possible for you to conceive how entirely she has won the affection, even of creatures commonly reported to be destitute of it; such as Gammer Grip, the miserly old hunks who lives in the tumble-down hut over against the crossways, and of Growler and Grab, the Nether Hall watch-dogs and terrors of the neighbourhood.

So possibly it has come to pass, that love has

clothed little Mistress Ruth about with a beauty strangers might not be able to see. For you, the gray eyes so frankly meeting yours from beneath their long dark lashes and the well-defined brows might be too grave and thoughtful, though indeed, quite to decide, you should wait till she speaks. The tip of that little nose, to please your classical notions, ought not possibly to assert its right of way as it does, in just the slightest of upward directions. Neither is her mouth of the "button-hole" or "two-cherries-on-one-stalk" order; though it is a handsome, sweet-tempered mouth enough, with its resolute yet mobile curves when the red lips part to speak or to smile. Then again, her hair is neither sunny nor raven-black, as it behoves heroines' hair to be; but then she did not look to be a heroine, this Hertfordshire maltster's daughter. Nor was it of the tawny red the fine ladies of those Merry Monarch days delighted to dye their locks; but just of an ordinary middling shade of brown, with the faint ripple of a natural curl on her white forehead, and something of the sort which defied the silken snood, and saucily insisted on straying at pleasure about the nape of her slender neck. As to her hands, they were as well moulded and serviceable a little pair as you might wish to see; and if they were a trifle browner than modish maidens might have considered altogether the thing, the sun, and the churn, and the delicious home-made bread, and such like things, were possibly responsible; but an ocean of milk of roses itself, could

not have been so soft and sweet as their touch, if you needed help from them in any pain or trouble befalling you.

Doubtless as pretty a pair of feet as hers were to be found in the shire; but if Cinderella's own were smaller—IF they were—they could not have been prettier; and let her wear what she might, those partial people who knew her, declared that Ruth Rumbold's clothes always became her. Be that as it may, very certain it is that that kirtle of flowered chintz looped above the pink-and-white striped tiffany petticoat marvellously becomes her trim figure, and matches bravely with the red and snow white hawthorn wreath crowning her shapely head; and never, declare her loving lieges, was fairer Queen of May than this Queen Ruth.

Her Majesty's partner in the dance now being so spiritedly carried on, is the lord of those May-day revels, Lawrence Lee, the young master of the Nether Hall farm. The natural order of the festivities would assign him the distinction; but in this particular instance it is no empty one. Left to his choosing, he would in every probability have invited Ruth, queen or no queen, to dance with him, for the two were fast friends; and such they had been since first Madam Lee, Lawrence's mother, had gone with her own five-year-old boy toddling beside her, across the fields to the Rye House; and there, taking the motherless baby Ruth in her kind arms, she had tenderly kissed the winsome face; and the little boy saw

with wondering awe how some tears were left shining, bright as dewdrops on daisy flowers, upon the placid sleeping eyelids as she laid the little creature down again in its cradle. "We must love her dearly, for she has no mother," murmured Madam Lee; and so faithfully had Lawrence backed up her proposition from that day forward, that his affection had gone on growing with his own inches; and if he loved Ruth when he paddled, a barefooted urchin, along with the ducks about the reedy shallows of the moat, inveigling her to the like unlawful courses, she was every whit as dear to him now that he stood a good five feet eleven in his buff boots.

As handsome a young fellow as you were likely to meet on a long summer day's journey, with his lithe figure, dark eyes, and crisp locks, was this young master, now in fact and in right, of the Nether Hall farm and its broad acres, since he became turned of twenty-one last Shrovetide, as for quite two years before he had been to all intents and purposes; for his farming genius was inborn, and he was never happier than when he was busy among his barns and his hayfields.

Possibly Lawrence Lee carries his liking for hard work so far, that holiday-making bores him. At all events, let him succeed as he may in cheating his guests generally into admiration of his high spirits, his efforts at gaiety are so exaggerated and fitful that Ruth is not for an instant to be imposed upon by them. And when at last the dance is done, and the syllabub is being handed round,

and the two stroll away into the hornbeam maze, which brings you, if you are acquainted with its mysteries, to the field-path leading straight to the river's brink, the good folks would stare to see—or can it be the leafy shadows which so heavily darken those two young faces? Nay; the shadows are from within, as if black care were busy at their hearts. Yet with a difference; for while Lawrence's brow is brooding and abstracted, Ruth's eyes are full of wistful anxiety; and with her little hand tight in his clasp the two silently thread the maze, until suddenly the fiddles and fifes strike up afresh; and this time their tune is "Begone Dull Care."

"Let us go back," said Lawrence, breaking from his moody silence into a laugh of forced merriment, "and enjoy ourselves while we can. Come, Ruth, one more dance," and he seized her by both hands.

"No," she answered. "I must go, Lawrence; and at once. It will be almost dark now before I am home, and father will be angry."

Lee's brow fell again; but he only said, "As you will;" and they walked on till they reached the river's brink, where a small boat, newly painted, and decked with ribbon-tied cowslip and daisy posies, lay moored to a stout stake.

Lawrence's customary mode of transplanting Ruth from dry land to his little craft, was to catch her light figure in his stalwart arms and seat her in the stern "before she knew where she was," as she would say with terrific frowns. To-night,

however, he soberly—did she fancy it was even a trifle absently?—assisted her in with his right hand. That this new order of things had not escaped her notice, some look in her face made him uncomfortably conscious.

"Is your majesty well placed?" he asked, affecting to laugh as he took the sculls and paddled out into mid-stream.

"We should be so," she replied with mock gravity, drawing up the rudder cords. "Thanks to your lordship's ceremony in seating us."

"That," returned he, breaking into a smile of unfeigned amusement at her lofty air, "is no more than what is due to your majesty's supreme rank from your majesty's most loyal subject."

"We find that good hearing," said Queen Ruth, "since we are convinced that my Lord Lawrence Lee always feels in his heart what his speech professes."

Her words were jestingly uttered; but the young man bit his lip hard; and his cheek grew white, as if some sharp sudden pain had stung him.

"Lawrence!" cried Ruth, starting and bending forward, "what is the matter? You are ill."

"Not I, dear heart," replied he, sweeping one hand hurriedly across his face.

"You are so pale," she insisted.

"Tired," laconically said he, vigorously plying his oars. "With that last measure, you know," he added in explanatory tones, as she opened her eyes rather contemptuously.

"For my part," she said, "I am not so delicate, and could have danced on till daylight again. Though in that case, 'tis clear, I should have had to be beholden to another partner," she added, with saucy composure.

"Not while I had a leg to stand on," briskly returned he. "But the fact is—well, I must be getting old, eh Ruth?"

"A whole quarter of a century. In four years more," interrupted she, with a ringing laugh.

"And that is ever so far on towards the half of a lifetime," he murmured thoughtfully to himself, "even supposing one is let live it through in peace. Well," he added, in a louder key, "'tis certain age brings a peck of cares, Ruth."

"Tell me some of yours," said she coaxingly, "so that I may share the burden of them. Shall I not?" she pleaded on in gentle earnest tones.

"Heaven forbid!" fervently ejaculated the young man. "Heaven forbid you should ever do that, child! There must come never a cloud to darken little Ruth's days."

"And yet I think mine can scarce be all sunshine if yours are—mind! mind! There you go! Running right into the mudbank!"

"Then must my steerswoman be to blame," laughed he. "Pull to the right, Ruth."

"I hate secrets," she pouted, doing as he directed.

"There are some things," rejoined the superior creature, "girls can't understand."

"Then, to be sure, I think they cannot be good

for boys—we crave your lordship's pardon—MEN we should have said;" and Ruth hemmed a little correcting cough—"to meddle with; and—There you are again. All in the osier tangle now!"

"Confound it! and whose fault but yours?" he cried petulantly. "Didn't I bid you keep to the right?"

"And how am I to see what I'm doing, pray, if you will bob your head about in that fashion?" retorted she, irately knitting her brows. "Lawrence, dear, what's your mighty secret?" she added, in honey-sweet tones.

"Who said I had one?" flashed he. "How stupid and disagreeable you are to-night, Ruth! What is it you want?"

"Only for you to be nice again. Dear, nice, happy, old Lawrence."

"Nice! happy! psha! bah! hang it! A fellow's nowhere with you girls if he isn't always up in the seventh heaven!" grunted Lawrence, and then he rowed on in sulky silence between the low-lying meadow banks, where the quiet oxen stood plunged knee-deep in the fresh young buttercup-studded grass, lazily sniffing in the fragrant evening air, all translucent with the greenish golden tints of mingled young moon-beams, and the last rays of the setting sun. Save the low chirp, chirp, twee of the birds settling to their nests among the pollard willows, and the ripple of the water about the boat's prow, not a sound broke the stillness, till a somewhat sharp

bend of the river brought them in sight of a wooden bridge, overshadowed to its right by a thicket of tall beeches and brushwood; while leftwards, a narrow road threaded on across it to a second bridge, spanning another stream that gleamed gray and still as glass between straight high-lying banks scarcely twenty yards beyond; and so winding on, over a waste of level common land, till it was lost in distance.

Dimly discernible through the copse to the right of the first bridge were the walls of a quaintly-timbered, many-gabled, two-storied house, whose latticed casements and trellised porch gleamed in the night's soft radiance; whilst a huge sign, bearing the royal arms, swung in its carved oaken framework, which projected from between the windows of the upper storey, right across the narrow road above the lofty wall of red brick which ran facing the inn for some distance.

Close down on a tiny landing-stage, by the nearer bridge's foot, a man stood watching the approach of the boat with his one available eye. The other, blurred and blemished apparently past all service, aggravated the naturally stern and sinister expression of features passable and even handsome, to which his puritanical pot-hat, leathern-belted, black, close-fitting doublet and plain white linen collar lent no relief. Neither did the knitting of his sombre brows relax, but rather gathered more heavily, as Lee made fast the boat and Ruth sprang lightly to the bank.

CHAPTER II.

HOW A MYSTERIOUS COAL BARGE CAME TO THE "KING'S ARMS."

"YOU are late, girl," he said gloomily.

"Nay, father," answered Ruth, glancing from his face towards the still brilliant westward horizon. "'Tis not yet seven o'clock."

"Tush!" he rejoined impatiently. "I'll have no more of these gaddings. And hark you, young mistress, no more of these vanities neither;" and he looked as he spoke, in angry contempt at her dainty skirts. "In with you at once and lay them away. Or better still, cast them into the kitchen fire. And as for this," he went on, roughly clutching at her hawthorn wreath, and dragging it from her head, he flung it into the water, "Let that settle it."

Tears of grief and indignation sparkled into Ruth's eyes, as she watched the beautiful flowers whirled by the eddying tide into deep water; but by a strong effort she restrained herself, and only said in tones of gentle reproach, "'Twas my crown, father. They made me Queen of May."

"Queen! crown! forsooth! did they so?" he said, with a bitter smile. "How is it the very stones do not cry out against this restoring in our unhappy country of these mummings and pagan holidays? Is it not enough to be having queens—ay, and kings—of flesh and blood wantoning it at Whitehall, but we must be seeing modest maidens aping their antics, and behaving in this fashion?"

"Nay, Master Rumbold," said Lee, "our people desired to do Ruth an honour; and I think you should be proud."

"I should be prouder," returned Rumbold, turning irefully on the young man, "to see her in her winding-sheet, a pale white—Marry! and let me look at your face now, Mistress," he went on, snatching her roughly by the chin. "Ha! red as your gaudy flowers there! So! I guessed as much. And there has been romping, has there?"

"Nay, father; just a little turn or two at Hoodman Blind, and Hunt the Slipper."

"What next?" said Rumbold groaningly, and turning up his eye.

"And—and a measure," faltered the truthful Ruth.

"Dancing!" and now the stern eye glared.

"Only round—round the Maypole, father."

Rumbold's lips parted with a jerk, as if he was about to break into still sharper rebuke; but as his eye caught the expression of Lawrence's face he contented himself with reiterating his dismissal.

"Good night, father," said Ruth, lifting her face to his, but Rumbold did not, or affected not to see. He was standing absorbed in watching the approach of a big black coal-laden barge which now hove lumbering in sight through the middle span of the bridge.

As the boat cleared into open stream again her huge black bows came athwart the poor drowning May garland, and swirled it deep down under water.

Whether the unfortunate wreath's destruction afforded Rumbold special pleasure, or that some other cause originated the grim smile slowly breaking on his gloomy lips, who shall say? The look at all events roused Lee's ire, and he said in tones of indignant reproach, which he seemed at small pains to conceal, "Your daughter bids you good-night, Master Rumbold."

The maltster started from his abstraction, and imprinting a cold kiss on Ruth's upturned brow, waved her away with a gesture of impatience, and resumed his contemplation of the barge.

Now, in Ruth's eyes coal-laden barges were things as ugly almost as they were common up and down their little silver Lea; and the rapt interest her father appeared to be taking in this one and particular specimen of its class, attracted her wonder and curiosity.

To her the boat seemed only more than a usually hideous one, by reason of its cruel destruction of her May crown; and partly in search of sympathy, partly in good-night, she stole a

glance at Lawrence Lee. Alack! He had seemingly forgotten her very existence, so absorbed was he also in following the course of the barge. "And this," thought Ruth, swallowing back a rising lump in her throat, was "the end of the delightfullest day she had ever spent!" Truly, as once she had read somewhere in some dusty fusty old book, "a merry going out makes a mournful coming in," and she turned with lagging and sorrowful step up the grassy slope, pausing, however, within a few yards of the road, which was fringed with a thick growth of bracken and bramble, to cast one more wistful glance at Lawrence, and to see whether the odious barge had taken itself out of sight.

Nothing of the sort. There stood the young man with folded arms, and brows gloomily knit, watching the boat, which was now turning from midstream. A minute more, and it floated up to a standstill alongside of the water steps, near the bottom of the inn garden.

The willow boughs interlace and hang so heavily over the white wooden paling which skirts the garden by the water's edge, and cast such bewildering shadows in the now fast gathering darkness, that Ruth cannot be certain of the precise number of figures all wearing broad-brimmed slouch hats and long black cloaks, which rise, as she looks, from the depths of the barge, and springing in hot haste to the bank, as quickly disappear in the direction of the inn yard.

Two—three—five—seven, and Ruth, despite her chagrins, was beginning to smile at the vision she has conjured up of Mistress Sheppard's face when she should see this concourse of bargemen, coal-heavers, or whatever they might be, besieging her kitchen door. "A scurvy lot, quotha!" could not Ruth hear her grumbling over it all as plain as if she really spoke? "A scurvy lot! Each of them, of course, looking for his cup of her home-brewed cider for their invaluable aid of landing a few coals."

Suddenly the lean, thread-paper body of Mistress Sheppard's husband showed among the gooseberry bushes, describing, as it neared the steps, the acute angles which always marked his fashion of welcoming distinguished guests to his hostelry.

"Here!" at the same moment said a voice from the barge in low tones, but of which every syllable was audible to Ruth through the utter silence around. "Lend a hand, can't you?" and then rose up another figure, habited like the rest, but with the folds of his mantle flung far back over his shoulders, leaving his arms free to encompass a load covered with a large piece of tarry canvas. This man's burden, judging by his swaying gait, must have been of no light weight. "They're not feathers," he growled, as he laboured with it to the broad top of the barge's sides.

"All right!" eagerly said the voice of Rumbold as he advanced to the steps. "Come along in, quick, Colonel. We'll unload presently."

"That's as you please," returned the other. "But by your leave we'll be having these under cover at once. They were tempered Venice way; and your own pretty daughter wouldn't get so much harm from the night dews, as they would. By the by,—little Mistress Ruth, she is safe indoors and abed?"

"Ay," sullenly grunted Rumbold. "That's my affair, I doubt, Colonel Rumsey."

"No offence," returned the other. "I just ventured to ask the question, because I had a notion that I caught a glimpse of young Farmer Lee's brown jerkin among the yew trunks yonder as we were clearing the bridge."

"And what if you did? Isn't he one of us?" said the maltster, casting a careless glance round.

"True," answered Rumsey, in rather lagging tones. "He's a necessary evil, as you explained, for the use his premises may be to us; but I'd as lief he'd been out of the bargain if't had been possible. He's but a stripling; and old heads are the only ones for our sort of work, depend upon't. There's what one may call a kind of touch-and-go slipperiness"— The rest of what the speaker might be having to say was lost in a deafening clash of steel, while he himself disappeared totally from Ruth's range of sight, in what seemed a flash of blue lightning.

"Lookye, Colonel!" said Rumbold, when, after a brief interval, he had succeeded, with Master Sheppard's aid, in hauling Rumsey to his feet again and landing him safe on the top of the

steps. "Half an inch more and you'd have been under water."

"'Twas those confounded nettles," growled the discomfited Rumsey, rubbing himself all over, and glaring vindictively behind him at the dank weed tangle all crushed into greenish mud under his heavy weight, while Rumbold and Sheppard busied themselves in hastily collecting the scattered contents of the fallen load. "Have you got them all?"

"Ay, ay," answered Rumbold. "Come along, Colonel. They're waiting for us."

"There were twelve," said Rumsey.

"Well, well, we can make another search presently," impatiently returned Rumbold. "There's no fear. The place hereabouts is haunted, the credulous yokels will tell you; and they'd sooner die than set foot in it after nightfall. So come. Have with you, Master Sheppard."

And followed by Sheppard the two walked towards the house.

And Lawrence? What has been his share in this unexpected scene? Hardly that of an amazed spectator, Ruth thinks, while she watches the hurried, half-stealthy nod of recognition bestowed on him by the new-comer, as the three men pass within a few yards of the spot where he is standing. Gloomily the young man returns their greeting, but he remains motionless as any stone statue, making no attempt to join them; and when they have disappeared he casts a wistful glance at his own little craft, where she

lies moored in a full flood of moonlight, and sighing so heavily that Ruth can hear the sound of it ever so distinctly in the silence, for not so much as a leaf is stirring now Then he turns, and, taking the narrow footpath leading to the front porch of the inn, is lost in its shadows.

Ruth rose from her hiding-place, listening intently. All quiet at last; and gathering the tiffany skirts close about her, she sped like a lapwing through the brushwood towards a little postern-gate in the red wall, and tapped at it softly.

CHAPTER III.

MAUDLIN SWEETAPPLE.

" ARRY! and so here you be at last, child!" said a half-glad, half-chiding, cracked, treble voice, as a brown withered hand unfastened the door from within. "Have you seen your father?"

"Let me come in, Maudlin, dear. Quick!" was all Ruth's response as she hurriedly slipped inside; and then, carefully closing the postern, she seized Maudlin by the elbow, and dragged her along the gravel path till they stood under a groined arch, in whose recesses two stout nail-studded oaken doors faced each other.

Pushing open the one to the right, which stood ajar and yielded at once to her touch, Ruth lifted a curtain of tapestry hanging on its inner side, and entered a spacious oak-wainscoted chamber, whose handsome but old-fashioned and well-worn furniture showed dimly in the light of the log-fire burning on the hearth.

"Yes," she said, at last answering the old woman's question. "He was down by the bridge."

"That's well," said Maudlin, heaving a sigh of

relief, as she sank into a big comfortable armed chair beside the hearth, "for he seemed main put about that you tarried so late. Tho', as I said to him: 'Tis but once in our lives we're young, Master Rumbold,' I said. And have you had a good time of it, dear heart? Marry! you've been as blithe as a cricket, I'll warrant; and Master Lee, did he row thee along home in his boat, lady-bird?"

"Of course he did," replied Ruth, stooping down over the hearth, and busying herself with mending the fire with the stray bits of smouldering log.

"Of course he did," mimicked Maudlin, her little bead-black eyes twinkling merrily. "Marry, come up! Hark at that now! And left Madam Lee, poor lady, to entertain her company as she might! That's what comes o being Queen o' May. Heigho! When douce King Jamie, as his own Scots folk used to call him, sat on his gold throne," went on Maudlin, spreading her withered hands out in the brightening blaze and looking hard into it, "they made May Queen o' me. Well, well, and Master Lawrence is gone home again now—eh, child?"

"No," said Ruth, with a slight start. "Oh, yes—I mean no—I mean—that is, how should I know?"

"How should you know?" echoed Maudlin testily; "because you've got eyes and ears, I suppose. Is the child gone silly?"

"It's you're silly," retorted Ruth crossly, "ask-

ing such stupid questions;" and then she, too, set to staring moodily into the fire.

"Fretty!" inwardly commented the old nurse, as she stole a cornerwise glance at Ruth's pale face. "Fretty as any teazle burr. And 'tisn't once in a six month she's that, poor dear. Tired out; that's what 'tis. As tired out, I'll warrant, with her bit o' pleasurin' as ever our old Dobbin is with his plough work, and as ready as he is for his feed o'—What'll you like for supper, lady-bird?"

"Nothing."

"Eh, naught's a sorry supper indeed. Naught? when there's syllabub sweet as your own Colley's milk can make it; and the hot-spiced cake"—

"Ah! how you do plague! I'm not a bit hungry. It's been eat, eat, eat, all day down at the Hall," said Ruth, still half cross, and yet half apologizing for her most unusual shortcoming.

"Madam Lee is main an' hospitable, to be sure," said Maudlin, "and likes folks, rich and poor, to be havin' their fill. God bless her!"

"Ay," nodded Ruth, and a faint smile of pleasure flitted across her grave face.

"And poor old Maudlin," slyly went on the old nurse, "would a'most be finding it in her heart to be jealous of her, if she wasn't quite sure—"

"Only she is," smiled Ruth, turning and twining her arms round her friend's neck. Then she drew down the old face, as brown and shrivelled as any russet apple, and kissed it. "She knows that I love her best in all the wide, wide world."

"Ay, ay, for sure. Does she now?" contentedly laughed the old woman. "Well, well, Maudlin'll do to count with maybe. But this junketing's done thee no good, Ruth," she went on, considering the upturned face with real anxiety. "You're pale as pale, child."

"Tired just a bit," answered Ruth, again striving to evade Maudlin's gaze. "Maudlin, dear, Master Sheppard was taking in sea-coal."

"Ay. Yesterday forenoon. I know."

"Nay, to-night. Just now, as I came by."

"Just now! What nonsense is the child's tongue talking? Sea-coal again, quotha? when Mistress Sheppard was ratin' of him fast as any mill-clapper but this very morning only in my hearing, for having more sea-coal in than the 'King's Arms' can use this side o' Yule-tide, if all the king's horses, and all the king's men, and the king himself into the bargain, should come an' put up. An' main and put about is Mistress Sheppard with his craze, as she calls it. 'Just like men,' says she. 'An' no wonder,' says I, 'for sarteny there's no denyin' you may have too much o' the best o' God's gifts. And what with Sheppard's sea-coal extravagance, and what with his oysters—"

"Oysters!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Ay. Nasty slippy things. Two big boat-loads o' them's landed within this se'nnight. 'Travellers,' says Master Sheppard, 'll swallow as many as you please to set afore 'em.' 'Maybe. Worse taste theirs,' says Mistress Sheppard. 'But

they won't eat the shells, I reckon; and three parts on 'em's just empty shells, she was tellin' of me; and as she says, says she, 'a groat a year paid for 'em quarterly 'd be a main sight more'n they're worth.' No, no, ladybird, you must ha' mistook. Like as not 'twas only the barge comin' to a standstill by the gate. Got stuck in the mud. The water thereabouts doesn't lie as thick as a sixpence."

"Will father be in soon, did he say, Maudlin?"

"He bid us not wait up for him; and to lock all but the postern-gate hard an' fast. He might be late, he said, havin' business to settle across at the 'King's Arms' with some dealers."

"In what?"

"Lord! how inquisitive the child is to-night. In grain, I reckon."

"From where?"

"Bless us! Ay, from Ware, for aught I know. Come, Ruth, an' you won't touch bit nor sup, let's to bed," and Maudlin rose yawning from her chair, and crossed with the aid of her stout silver-headed staff to the foot of a broad oaken staircase at the other end of the apartment. "Ho, you! Barnaby lad. A light here!" she cried in shrill tones, rapping the end of her stick vigorously on the bare polished floor. "A light here, I say! Plague seize Sleepyhead!" she grumbled on, when no response was forthcoming; "Snorin' away in his owl's roost a'ready, I'll dare swear. Barnaby! Barnaby!"

"Nay," said Ruth, pointing up the staircase, to

where the moonbeams streaming in through the criss-cross mullioned panes, flooded all the length of a long gallery to almost the clearness of day, "We want no light but that;" and followed at a more sober pace by Maudlin, she tripped up the stairs towards a door opening into a circular stone chamber, whose vaulted roof was supported in its centre by a huge pillar of roughly-hewn stone, graced about its base with rusty iron rings, and remnants of chain, whilst a concourse of plethoric-looking sacks lay stacked about the floor, which was of grayish flags seamed and worn as if by the ceaseless tread of feet, especially round the pillar.

Icy chill the air struck in this place; and with no little shivering and shuddering old Maudlin hurried on through it as fast as her rheumatic twinges permitted. "'Tis a cruel shame!" she muttered, and the observation was by no means a novel one in her mouth, "that you can't get snug between the sheets without first catchin' your death o' cold; and havin' your wits all terrified out o' you with passin' through that gruesome den." Not, however, till she was well clear of the vaulted chamber, and had gained the corridor beyond, did Maudlin indulge in the latter part of her running commentary. "Marry! I come goose-flesh from top to toe when I think of all the poor souls those walls have seen die an' rot."

"Nay," said Ruth, "but that was only the Debtors' Prison, where the poor creatures were kept when they couldn't pay their rents and their

tithes to the great lords and barons who used to live here. The state prison—"

"Lord forgive us!" shuddered Maudlin, "and state that poor skeleton Master Lockit says they found there was in, you may depend. Every bone rheumatics and lumbago, I doubt. Ugh! Yes, I know. It lies down below water-mark, and opens into the underway that runs to Nether Hall."

"Ah! nonsense, Maudlin," laughed Ruth. "That's an old wives' tale."

"And what if it be, quotha?" bridled Maudlin. "What if it be? Aren't old wives' tales as good as young maids' tittle-tattle? I tell thee, child, as sure as we stand here there's a clear way beneath us; though it may have as many twists and crinkum crankums, I grant ye, as a half-scotched adder—all the mile and a half to Nether Hall. But him that's a mind for tryin' o't, 'll find himself when he's done, in the cellar beneath the ruined tower that's nearest the Hall, an' turnin', as one may call it, head to tail about, he'll be back again by the moat dungeon-door, down just under our feet. Unless he likes to stop short by the deep black hole in the wall, which Master Lockit has it—and, as times go, he's a fair truthbider, though his tales are a'most as long as our cat's—Master Lockit has it, opens up into your father's sleeping chamber. But hark ye, Ruth, now don't you be telling young Lee about all that, mind; or he'll be for tryin' of it. There's not a venturesomer harebrain than he in all the shire, let him once set his mind to a thing."

"I doubt," carelessly smiled Ruth, "he knows the fine tale well enough."

"Tale! Tale again! Well, well, and he's pleased to think it so 'tisn't Maudlin 'd have him taught better. More by token that there's death in it."

"Death!" echoed Ruth, her smiles fading.

"Choked," answered Maudlin, slowly nodding her head up and down, "with smoke-damp that'd stifle all the breath out of your body before you were six yards in."

It was Ruth's turn to shudder. "Well, what does it matter?" she said, when having closed and bolted the door of the little bedchamber they had now entered she put her arms round Maudlin's neck and kissed her, "while there's our darling little river and Lawrence's boat. By the way, Maudlin, he's christened her the 'Queen Ruth!'"

"Has he now?" delightedly smiled Maudlin. "That's main pretty of him. Though I doubt Master Rumbold 'll be none so pleased. Red rags at a bull 's much the same as talk about kings an' queens to him. He's all for lord protectors and cattle o' that colour. But never you fear, sweetheart; there'll be none o' them ever set up while Lawrence Lee's above ground, and he'd send all the lord protectors ever hatched flyin' before they set foot within a hundred miles o' Hoddesdon. He's like his father before him, rest his soul; and all for King Charles."

"You think so?" said Ruth brightly.

"Ay; that's my own blithe ladybird at last,"

cheerily cried the old woman. "Sunshine makes pretty maids' eyes sweeter than clouds, let me tell thee. And for the red roses instead o' white ones—hark!" went on the housekeeper, as the gate tower-clock chimed eight. "There's a long spell o' beauty sleep to be got yet. So have with thee. Say thy prayers, and then shut fast thine eyes, and I'll answer for it we'll be having all the red roses back the morn."

And then returning Ruth's embrace, Maudlin dismissed the young girl to her chamber, which lay immediately beyond.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD RYE HOUSE.

HEN the Rye House was built, or at least its gate-tower wing of which we are now speaking, and which was as old as the time of King Henry the Sixth, probably no dwelling of any importance, with the exception of Nether Hall, a still more ancient baronial structure, stood within miles of it.

Strong as rocks were its fortified outer walls; and in many parts its interior walls were three feet thick. This was the case with the old "Debtors' Prison," lying at the older wing's extreme end, and forming the angle connecting it with the new wing, which dated only from the time of Queen Elizabeth. In this debtors' prison Master Rumbold, as we have seen, now stored his malt. The wall separating Maudlin Sweetapple's little sleeping chamber from the more spacious one occupied by Ruth, was of at least equal strength and solidity with the walls of this storing room; but while in the one case the surface showed the bare hewn stone, polished only by the hand of time, panellings carved in many a quaint device,

and reaching half-way to the flat oak-timbered ceiling, lined the "Lady's Bower," as time beyond all count, Ruth's room had been called.

Here she held sway undisputed; spending in it hours of her lonely days when her father was absent from home, as of late she noted he so frequently had been. So she sat strumming on the broken and half-stringless virginal, or spelling out the crabbed type of several worm-eaten books, chiefly poems—long winded, wordy things enough. Still she cared for them in a fashion; and one volume, whose title-page set forth that its contents were from the pen of one William Shakespeare, a play-actor, took her mightily. Line after line she would tell you of many of the long speeches and odd sayings it contained; though she kept her studies to herself, for Maudlin had not very much of a turn for book-learning, and Master Rumbold always said, if it had not been for the Bible, and that godly person Mr. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, child of his should not have been taught to read at all. Then as to writing, he was near never speaking one word more to Madam Lee after one fine day when he made the frightful discovery that she had been teaching the little girl so successfully to make pot-hooks and hangers, that long before Lawrence was out of the alphabet Ruth had been writing on her own responsibility, and in unmistakeable fair round hand: "Fear God. Honour the King." Wroth indeed was Master Rumbold over the "fine surprise" thus prepared for him by instructress and pupil. The

knowledge, however, could not be unlearned; and such a penwoman as Ruth remained till the day of her death you might go a hundred miles and not find.

And so with her wheel and her tapestry-frame for her father's company, and her graver accomplishments for the solitude of the Lady's Bower, Ruth contrived to live as happily as any princess. Solitude is, however, no term to connect with the spot where the birds sang their sweet music the livelong day amid the beechen branches which swept the panes of the old painted oriel window, and the wind sighed gently in the long summer evenings through the ivy trails and creepers which Ruth trained about its carved stone-cornices, or in his rougher moods snarled and blustered, like the tyrant he can be, round the ancient house. But in Ruth's eyes the broad look-out from that window always wore a beauty, and with all her fifteen years' experience she had not been able to determine whether that expanse of lowly undulating meadow-land and winding waters looked loveliest in its spring and summer garb of green, tented over with cloudless blue, or in autumn's grays and russets, or clad in its pure white winter snow robe; nor even whether golden sunlight, or the moon's silvery sheen, as to-night she stood gazing on it, pleased her best.

Master Rumbold himself slept on the ground-storey, in a room immediately beneath his stored malt-sacks. This chamber, tradition said, contained in its stone flooring a trap-door opening

upon a ladder which conducted into the fearsome dungeons underground, where prisoners used to be thrust, bidding hope and the blessed air and daylight farewell for ever. The subject was, however, one rarely touched upon in the maltster's presence by those who best knew his humours; for he would either smile in bitter contempt, or—and indeed that more generally happened—frown angrily; and, let his mood be the one or the other, always turned the conversation at last with some half-uttered remark that so might it, or might it not be, and that he had simply occupied the room ever since he had been master of the place, because it commanded a watch on both wings of the house. The quaintly timbered walls of the new wing contained the malting-house; while its gabled roof stretching up stiff as cat's ears, afforded sleeping accommodation for the domestic servants and the few workpeople living on the premises.

The handsome guest-chamber, or keeping-room as it was called, was not reserved merely for high days and holidays, for Richard Rumbold had no liking for such vain settings apart of time; but was used as the general sitting-room, and extended from end to end of the ground-storey. Its three windows fronted the great square smooth-shaven grass-plot, which by tradition and courtesy was called "the pleasaunce." In the middle stood one solemn big yew-tree, clipped, beehive-shape, and surmounted by a leafy monstrosity which Maudlin said was meant for a peacock. Never a flower,

however, save the poor little buttercups and daisies, whose heads were chopped off in a twinkling, if they did venture to peer forth, ever starred that dreary pleasaunce, for the maltster said he had other uses for his money than to be wasting it on gaudy nonsenses like flowers.

But returning now to the old wing, let us peep in for a moment on old Adam Lockit, the gate-house keeper, in his sanctum deep hidden in the recesses of the vaulted archway piercing the tower, and giving on its outer side upon the drawbridge, which was still let down at dawn, and drawn up at sunset, by the massive old iron chains working through the wall.

Not a snugger corner in the whole establishment than this of Master Lockit's. Within the last year or so, since he has not been so young as he used to be, and the dragging at those heavy chains has come to be a bit of a pull upon him, though he is a hale enough man for his threescore and ten, he has condescended to accept the assistance of a lad, employed originally as a Jack-of-all trades in the malting-yard, but promoted to the dignity of domestic factotum by reason of sundry excellent qualities. Foremost among these stand unimpeachable honesty and placid temper. A characteristic less distinguishing Barnaby Diggles, for so the lad was named, was animal courage. He was, in other words, an arrant coward; in the matter at all events of hobgoblins and things of the sort. He was, however, but just turned of sixteen; and time as yet had never tried his mettle

with any real and substantial danger. Meanwhile, nothing so much charmed him as having his imagination tortured with ghost stories by the village gossips; unless, indeed, it was to sit and incline his ears to the hundred and one yarns of all countries and ages that Adam Lockit loved at least as much to spin.

When Barnaby is not to be found after his day's work for love nor money, you are safe to run him to earth in the gatehouse room. A Sindbad's valley it is to him, a Hassan's cave, with all its treasures of crossbows and battle-axes, and catapult relics; its bits of chain-armour, its battered helmets, stags' antlers, and hunting-horns, for all and each of which Adam had his story to tell, as vividly as if he had been honoured by the personal acquaintance of Joan of Arc and William Rufus, or gone a buck-hunting in Hainault Forest with the merry monks of Waltham or bluff King Hal.

What gruesome tales too, Master Lockit, sitting of bitter winter nights in his warm ingle neuk, could tell you between the whiffs of his pipe, about yonder spiral staircase, "There, just behind you," which goes winding up past the nail-studded iron clamped door, shutting in the old wing's upper storey. Ever so high, aloft to the tower roof, with the spiked vane atop of its tall twisted chimney. "But he was speakin' mainly," he was, Adam would say, "of where it went round an' round, an' down an' down to what was just wine and wood cellars now, but 'twas no such honest end

as that they were scooped out for hunnerds and hunnerds, if so be 'twarn't thousands o' years agone. And Master Rumbold might say what he pleased, an' deny it you as he liked, 'twere just for all the world a honeycomb o' cells an' passages, openin' right an' left into dungeons, till you come out by the weir, over against the ruins o' Nether Hall."

"Go on! go on!" Barnaby would gasp, writhing in ecstasy at the recital. "Slidikins! I'm all goose-flesh from top to toe! Master Lockit, go on!"

"More idiot you," Adam would rejoin, puffing away with immeasurable but secret content in the effect produced by his word picture of their hidden surroundings. "What is it to the likes of us? An't such things all done with now? I'm speakin', I am, of the good old times when royal kings an' queens theirselves wasn't safe on their gold thrones, for blows in the dark."

"Happen it might come again," Barnaby would murmur, staring with hopeful rounded eyes into the blazing logs; but when the old belfry clock overhead boomed its warning to bed, Master Diggles stumbling half blind with terror to his sleeping-room in the gabled roof, was a sight not easily to be forgotten.

That same iron-clamped door atop of the tower staircase opened—if indeed one may so speak of a door which so rarely was put to its use—into a chamber called the Warder's Room. Not having been inhabited for a generation or two, it was of course reputed to be haunted by a "White Woman," and that was no more than truth and fact;

for many an hour Ruth spent in it, weaving romances out of her own brain, for the mail-clad knights and wimpled ladies whose pictured forms gleamed dimly from the rich oak wainscoted walls, and the designs and quaint devices of their panellings which accorded with those on the walls of Ruth's room, lying immediately beyond.

Ruth had a theory that this suite of rooms on the upper storey of the gatehouse wing had in olden times been occupied by the lord and lady of the ancient mansion; and the notion was probably a correct one, since in no part of the place were traces of such magnificence to be seen as here. Fragments of painted glass glowed in the mullioned windows, showing scraps of monstrous griffin-like heads and scaly tails, and enscrolled letters, of which only one word in one of the upper lights of Ruth's window remained entire—"Loyaulté."

Time and wear had so polished the wood of this chamber's richly-parqueted floor that its smooth surface reflected, like some quiet pool, the tall-backed chairs of tawny and gilt Cordovan leather, ranged stiffly against the walls, and about the long narrow oaken table covered with its faded velvet drapery; and the massive proportions of the huge carved oaken chest, capacious enough to shut in one of the mailed knights, or even portly brown-frocked Abbot Benedict Ogard of Waltham Abbey himself, who smiled, come fair weather come foul, come day come night, so unctuously down on you from his recess beside the loftily-coped fireplace.

Ruth could very well recall the time when the lower portion of the walls of this room had been hung with Flemish tapestry, embroidered with subjects from the Old Testament and early Grecian lore. One winter, however, when King Frost intruded so tyrannically in-doors that people shivered in their beds, Maudlin Sweetapple had stripped down the greater part of this tapestry to make curtains for Ruth's room. If in cutting away the tattered and hopelessly unmendable parts of it, she had patched the stuff together again in such fashion as to leave Solomon in all his glory turning a summersault on the extreme tip of Jonah's whale's nose, and Goliath's gory head frowned grimly from the neck of the Trojan horse, did it not all serve every whit as well for keeping the wind away?

No doubt the situation of the Warder's Room, cut off as it was so completely from the rest of the house, had first obtained it its ghostly renown; one not likely to dwindle, by the knowledge that its outer door giving on the staircase was always kept locked. This, however, was no more than an ordinary precaution; since the room stood literally in the very portal of the whole house, though time had brought its changes, and various small doors in the new wing now admitted by the wicket the maltster's few visitors and his workpeople to the malt-yard.

The master of the house himself did not set foot inside the Warder's Room twice in a year; and when on that May morning, before starting for

Nether Hall, Ruth entered it, according to her daily custom, to let a little fresh air and sunshine into its grim silence, she had been startled at perceiving her father standing with folded arms and sombre brows near the hearth, gazing into its cold blackness as if lost in moody thought. On becoming conscious of her presence, however, he had roused up from his abstraction, and with a hurried and absent "Good morrow, child," he turned and went out, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER V.

HOW MASTER RUMBOLD TOLD LAWRENCE LEE WHAT THE VERY AIR MIGHT NOT HEAR.

HIS recollection of the morning, troubles Ruth strangely now, as she sits in the broad window-seat of her own room, her eyes fixed indeed on the fair moonlit scene before her, but for once seeing nothing of its beauty. Vague fears and suspicions and dread of coming evil weigh down her heart, as one by one she threads together the incidents of this May-day, which was to have been such a golden one. It is all in vain that she laughingly tells herself her father has every right to perambulate his own premises. All in vain she argues that Lawrence Lee may be as sulky as a bear with a sore head, if it gives him any pleasure; and no concern of hers. Certainly not. All the same too, of course, it is to her if a legion of coal-barges come their way, so long as it is not she who stands in Master Sheppard's shoes.

For her part, however, Ruth could not consider the landlady of the "King's Arms" at all a bad sort. On the contrary, she entertained a great

liking for her. Folks were fond of saying that Mistress Sheppard had a shrewish tongue; but Ruth had never felt its edge. The good woman was as foolish as everybody else in the matter of spoiling the little mistress of the Rye House; and though she would as soon tell a prince of the blood a piece of her mind, as she would the stable-boy of her own establishment, if she saw fit, she would have vowed the old dun-cow to be white as milk, if it could have afforded Ruth any satisfaction; or declared that Master Richard Rumbold was the most urbane and delightful gentleman in all the country, though no love, to put it mildly, was lost between her and her opposite neighbour.

One reason for this among divers others, was their difference of opinion concerning the sign of her hostelry. What easier, the maltster always insisted, than to change it from the "King's Arms" to the "Commonwealth Arms?" or some such reasonable name? There could be no offence, he argued, to anybody in that. But Mistress Sheppard maintained there was, and much offence too. She would stand by and see no such senseless choppings and changings. There had never been anything common about the place, since place it was; and shouldn't be while she was above ground. And what did the man want of such notions? And Master Sheppard, if he could have answered that question, as perhaps he might, maintained a discreet silence, as indeed is the only safe course when one finds one's self betwixt two stools, as his lot in life placed him; for he was

never certain whether he stood more in awe of his wife or of Master Rumbold. Once, it is true, he ventured so far as to hint to her, that for the good of the house, and the sake of peace, it might be well to think over Master Rumbold's suggestion, and that he, Sheppard, was agreeable, if so be—but having got thus far he was pulled up by Mistress Sheppard, who said she "was not agreeable; that those who didn't like the sign might spare their custom, and the good o' the house'd be none the worse for lack o' their company." And so the sign remained true to its colours, and an eyesore and a thorn in the flesh to roundhead Master Rumbold.

Differences between neighbours were, however, unfortunately common enough in those troubled times; for troubled they were. It is true that the old quarrel between the king and the parliament, which had brought Charles the First to his sad death at Whitehall, had been patched up very neatly more than twenty years ago now, when his son, King Charles the Second, had been restored to the throne; but the feelings of the people were like smouldering fires, and ready as ever to break out in discontent. The country, moreover, was divided, not now, as then, into those who did approve of its being governed by a king and those who did not; but there were many loyal enough sober-minded folks, and holding quite varying forms of religious belief, who were sorely disappointed with the manner in which the king, whom they had helped to restore with so much expense of precious lives and of money, governed;

or, more properly, neglected to govern. Yes, a careless "Merry Monarch"—all very well to call him so—but your merry men and women are frequently cruelly selfish ones, and contrive to bring tears into other people's eyes every time they are pleased to laugh.

Then, too, there were many who dreaded the day when Charles's brother, the Duke of York, should succeed him on the throne. There seemed hardly any doubt that he had adopted the Roman Catholic form of belief; and a strong impression prevailed that Charles was also greatly inclined to do the same.

How far this was true can, perhaps, never be fairly determined. The king's pleasures always interested him vastly more than religious questions of any kind, and the fears of those who dreaded to see England fall back under popish rule were probably exaggerated. It is very certain that these ideas were fed by dangerous men, who for their own selfish ends spread alarms of popish plots and conspiracies which existed nowhere but in their own mischievous brains; and many harmless peace-abiding Roman Catholics were hunted to prison and death, solely for the crime of being faithful to the creed they had been reared in. These did not, however, remain entirely unavenged, for the love of fair play and of justice triumphed in the end; and the wretches who had persecuted their fellow-men under the pretence of religion were many of them severely punished, and few pitied them.

The father of Lawrence Lee had died, fighting for King Charles the First on Worcester field; while Richard Rumbold had lost his eye in the selfsame struggle, serving the Parliamentary forces.

Rumbold hated the Stuart race; and when he used to hear Madam Lee teaching her little Lawrence to flourish his chubby hands and cry, "God save the king!" an ugly sneer would begin to gather about his lips, though he would hold them fast shut, for the Nether Hall folks were prosperous and well-to-do; and the maltster, if he could avoid it, never quarrelled with money. It was, besides, no easy matter to pick a dispute with this young Lee, who troubled his head so vastly little about the affairs of the nation, and whose whole mind was taken up in the management of his farm.

As to his heart, it was divided between his mother and his old playmate and constant friend Ruth; and though Ruth's play-days were fast ebbing away, and the old games were now frowned upon by her as silly and rompish, Lawrence cared for her every whit as much as ever; and Rumbold perceiving this, thought he saw in it a turn for the serving of his own purposes. And when one day, about the time of this story's opening, the maltster being in one of his gloomier moods, which, indeed, had grown so strangely frequent that he was rarely out of them, chanced to launch forth into one of his tirades against the king and his government, and said that "sooner than see daughter of his, wife of a man who loved a Stuart, be

that Stuart Charles or James, or Tom, Dick, or Hal, he would see her in her coffin."

"Love!" replied Lee, turning a little pale as the maltster spoke, "is a strong word, Master Rumbold."

"Your father loved the first Charles Stuart," said Rumbold with knitted brows.

"Ay, to the death!" sighed the young man; "but I'll warrant 'tis little enough his present majesty remembers that."

Rumbold looked up quickly, and the dull glitter of his eye brightened into a glance of searching scrutiny as he fixed it on Lawrence. "An ungrateful race always, these Stuarts," he said with a shrug.

"Nay, I say not that," rejoined Lee. "Your poor bedesman may know every scratch and mark upon his little scraped-up hoard; but can your rich trader tell you one from another of his coffered guineas? And king's friends are so. Countless as the grain I sow in my fields."

"To be as soon scattered to the winds, and trod under foot," growled Rumbold. "Put not your trust in princes."

"I'd as lief trust one," smiled Lawrence, who knew his Bible too, "as any other child of man."

"You speak idly, as a parrot chatters," said Rumbold in displeased tones; "and, in truth, I have long taken you for a —"

He paused with a jerk. The word on his lips was scarcely one calculated to win over the young

man to his ideas, and he substituted the milder epithet of "featherbrain."

"I thank you for your compliment, Master Rumbold," said Lawrence swelling a little, and glancing silently, but proudly, round on his neat barns and ricks, among which they chanced to be standing. "I flattered myself my brains were none so empty."

"Psha!" returned Rumbold; "a man may be a Mr. Worldly Wise, and still a fool and a beggar touching the treasure that waxeth not old. Think you that the storing of barns and the breeding of fat oxen will bring a man peace at the last?"

"It may help to it, I doubt," answered the young proprietor, "if it so be that that man uses bounteously the wealth his barns and his cattle bring him. Not hoarding it greedily, but sharing it with those who need it. Then heaven, I take it, is like to bless our store."

The maltster wagged his head impatiently.

"Though in sooth," went on Lawrence, "I require not you to remind me, Master Rumbold, that though a man bestow all his goods to feed the poor, and hath not real charity, he is sounding brass indeed; and Heaven, that seeks pure gold only, will have none of him. I know, of course, as well as you do, that a clear conscience—"

"And what," interrupted Rumbold, wincing involuntarily as Lee uttered these last words, and gazing gloomily into the muddy duck-pool at his feet, "what may be your notion of that?"

"Of a clear conscience?" lightly laughed Law-

rence. "Why, first and last, at all events, that its owner never do his neighbour any wrong."

"And who is my neighbour?" muttered Rumbold, as if speaking to himself, and still keeping his eye moodily fixed on the turgid water. "Answer me that, Lawrence Lee."

"Who is not?" replied Lee, repressing a yawn, but with a cheery smile. "I take it, we're neighbours all. Everything that breathes; from old Shock here"—and he bestowed a friendly pull on the grizzled ears of the sheep dog, who stood poking his cold nose into his master's hand—"up to the king himself. What's the matter, Master Rumbold?" for the maltster started and bit his nether lip, as if in some sudden pain.

"Nothing, boy," he said. "What should be?"

"The king himself—God bless him!" continued Lee, waxing unusually eloquent, for ordinarily he was not a man of many words. "And that if we do—"

"Do, do!" cried Rumbold, wincing again. "The old story. Always with your sort. And faith may go to the wall. Well, if we do what forsooth?" he added, not without curiosity.

"Nay, if it please you better," answered Lawrence good-humouredly, "for it is all one;—if we *don't* do harm, and work no evil against any man:"—

"Upon him who doeth evil, evil must be done," said Rumbold in deep melancholy tones.

"That," returned Lawrence, recoiling a pace and gazing in perplexity at his companion, "that

was not the teaching, Master Rumbold, of Him who died for all men. I doubt 'tis the same as if one should say, Evil must be done that good may come."

"Ay," muttered Rumbold, folding his arms upon his breast and setting his lips firmly, "it must."

"Why? Fie, now, fie!" laughed Lawrence, fixing his eyes with something of uneasy curiosity in their clear, dark depths, on Rumbold's face. "That, they say, is the Jesuits' watchword. Who would have thought to hear it from the lips of godly Master Rumbold?"

"You mock me," returned Rumbold; "I am the worst of sinners."

"Nay, nay, but I trust not," said Lee, getting really uncomfortable.

"You mock me, I say," reiterated Rumbold.

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Lee. "It is rather that you mock me; for by my faith I do not understand you to-night, Master Rumbold."

"Listen," hoarsely said Rumbold, turning suddenly on Lee, and gripping him by the elbow; "you shall understand. I will explain, but not here," he went on, dropping his voice to a whisper, and casting a far-seeing, cautious glance round. "Not here: there may be eavesdroppers. Hark! what's that?"

"Only the beasts munching their supper in the stables," said Lee. "They will tell no tales."

"The very air must not hear," said Rumbold.

"Why, if it is so particular as all that, then,"

rejoined Lawrence, still half jestingly, but growing less and less light about his heart, "come this way." And pushing open a wicket, he conducted his companion along a rather miry slip of by-road towards the apple orchard, which stretched behind and around the ruined gatehouse, whose jagged outlines were beginning to stand out grim and gaunt in the sickly rays of the moon. Wading through the long grass so thickly carpeting the ground up to the tower, that its base was completely hidden, Lee conducted Rumbold to the top of a small flight of broken stone steps, so lost in an overgrowth of ivy trails and brambles as to be invisible to stranger eyes; but Lee, with a thrust of his hand, parted the leafy screen, and signed to Rumbold to follow him down the steps, which led to a low, iron-clamped and heavily padlocked door deeply sunken in the wall of the tower's foundations.

"'Tis a well-screened spot, is it not?" said Lee, answering Rumbold's inquiring glances.

"Well secured," said the cautious Rumbold, who had not much opinion of mere unaided twigs as safeguards, and seemed more disposed to admire the huge iron padlock adorning its latch. "What do you store here?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"The place—except for a few bones, which may have been man's or sheep's for aught I know, or ever gave a thought to—is full of emptiness."

"Yet you keep it as sealed as if it shut in untold riches."

"As for the matter of that, it does, too, in a roundabout sort of way," said Lawrence smiling and colouring a little. "Or it may do so; for 'tis said—though I will not answer for the truth of it, that if you follow your nose far enough, the way it leads, you will find yourself in the vaults under your own gatehouse. Our houses—yours and mine—Master Rumbold, were built in queer times; when a man could not call his life his own. And when he dared not show his face above ground, slipped away as he could under it."

"And a fig then for his pursuers," said Rumbold, as he stepped into the vault, whose darkness was only lightened by the moon-rays feebly struggling in through the grating of a loophole high up in its walls. "A fig for them, hey?"

"As you say," said Lawrence, faintly echoing the low laugh of his companion, which reverberated far away, in mocking unearthly discords, as though challenging the pair to explore the place's long-forgotten intricacies. "I doubt they must have been as successful as if they sought needles in a bottle of hay."

"Shut the door!" said Rumbold.

Lawrence obeyed, and what further Richard Rumbold had to say was heard by no eavesdroppers save the slug and reptile creatures who had long made the place their own.

Some hours later the door opened again, and one of the two men reappeared. Peering first

cautiously right and left, he locked the door behind him and stole hurriedly up the steps. The figure of this man is assuredly that of Lawrence Lee, but strangely unlike his light bright step is that stumbling, swaying gait; and can that ashen white face, those eyes startled and staring, as if they had met some fearful thing, indeed be his? And where is Rumbold?

CHAPTER VI.

SOMETHING IN THE WATER.

ONE thing only was quite certain, that the maltster was to be seen next morning at the usual hour among his men. As for Lawrence Lee, whatever Rumbold had confided to him remained a secret as far as the nature of it was concerned. To hide, however, from Ruth that something was amiss with him was a more difficult task, and he had failed in it.

During these last weeks, moreover, the Rye House had grown into a very prison of dulness. Rumbold, always a sombre and taciturn man, had come to be like a stone statue moving about the place, never speaking but when absolutely compelled.

The recollection of all this, and of the events of the past day, crowd bewilderingly now upon Ruth's mind, as she sits, with her chin resting upon her hand, gazing out into the night, from which the young May moon is slowly fading. Only a few stars cheer the surrounding darkness,

excepting yonder where the yellow lamp-light streams through the close-drawn curtains of the guest-parlour window of the King's Arms.

Many a summer evening, when Mistress Sheppard's guests tarried as late as this, Ruth could remember catching the echoes of merry laughter and snatches of songs from that window; but though the night was warm as a July one, not a sound was to be heard save the low hooting of the owls and the gurgling of the water in the moat.

She stretched her head from the window, to listen for the familiar sound of her father's heavy footfall up the wicket-path.

How late he stayed!

And Lawrence? had he gone home yet in his boat? Surely. And yet—ah! well. What was it all to her? Why vex her head about it? Why not go to sleep and forget her fancies? Fancy! were those dark cloaked figures fancy forsooth? Like some evil dreams, indeed, they haunted her mind. And that flash of cruel steel blue light? No fancy that. But what concern could it be of Ruth's? Why, a turn of her wheel would dispel it all. There is no remedy like a little bit of diligent work for troublesome thoughts, or even sad ones. How provoking that the stupid thing had not a shred of flax in it! There it stood in its corner, a beautiful wheel of ebony inlaid with ivory, her father's gift last birthday, but like a fair body without a soul, destitute of the flax. How she could have worked away by the light of the stars which were so brilliant that lamp-light

would be an utter superfluity—if only the flax had been to hand!

Unluckily it all lay locked away, a splendid store, in the big oak linen press, atop of the keeping-room staircase; and just the least bit in the world of extra courage was indispensable for traversing those silent passages at this hour. And yet after all, a very little bit, for Ruth was no coward. The chief difficulty was to avoid disturbing Maudlin. It would be such a shame to do that. The old woman lay so comfortable—leagues away in the land of dreams. Ruth could see that, as she peeped at her through the half-open door. So soundly sleeping that she gathered courage, and stepped tiptoe across the floor, out into the corridors beyond, till she could see the sacks away at its furthermost end in the store-room, all huddled together like hunchbacks under the dim starlight, or—like those cloaked men who had got out of the barge! and then Ruth shivered. But that was little to be wondered at, for the air of the store-room struck icy cold as she stole on—on into the corridor where the linen press stood.

Close beside it a small lattice afforded a glimpse of the river just beyond the bridge. There lay the barge! Still moored up alongside the bank; a huge black blot upon the silvery water.

And the "Queen Ruth?" Nay—as if it was likely to be there now. Why, her pretty little cat Tab had as much to do with the big elephant who lumbered by in the show yesterday, as the

merry, graceful, little "Queen Ruth" could have with yonder ugly boat? And yet, and yet—ah! what a consolation it is to make sure of anything! to crush out one's absurd fancies—dead, past all coming to life again! And how temptingly easy in this case! Quite as easy anyhow, as to be standing there, dreaming and talking about it. Only just to steal down by the stairs and through the keeping-room, where the still smouldering fire cast a few dull gleams, and so out by the narrow path to the wicket. Then but a step—but softly, creep low for thy life, Ruth—in the high wall's shadow, and drag the cloak, snatched in haste from a peg, close and well about thy face and shoulders. And what if Rumbold should be returning now? But there is never a sound save the flapping of the bats' wings, that beat in her face, and bring her heart into her mouth.

She was so near now to the gilded patch of light upon the black road before the inn parlour window, that had the pane been open, she must beyond all question have caught the voices of those within. But though just for one instant she paused, pressing her hand upon her beating heart to listen, not so much as an echo reached her; and she hurried on, towards the parapet of the bridge, where it wound down lower and lower to the little landing-stage—and leaned over.

Still tied to the stake lay the "Queen Ruth." The swift stream from the bridge gently swaying her bows, and her gay cowslip posies and ribbon knots fluttering in the breeze now fast springing up.

Ruth's heart sank. Past all doubt then, here was Lawrence hanging about, when he should have been back at Nether Hall an age ago. This, surely, was no night to be loitering with—with a parcel of coal-heavers; and Ruth shuddered. Pray Heaven their calling was such an honest one.

There she stood gazing with puzzled bent brows upon the barge, lying motionless and black as a funeral bier on the sluggish water, gleaming leaden gray in the sickly starlight.

Slowly and sadly Ruth prepared to retrace her steps. Doubts and uncertainty would, after all, she thought, have been preferable to this sight, which did but strengthen her suspicions of she knew not what. Supposing—Hark! A shuffling of footsteps, and the sound of voices. It must be the inn party dispersing, and exchanging their good-nights. And Ruth turns to fly back to the wicket.

Too late. The tramp of feet was close upon her, heavy and measured, but it was approaching from the other side of the bridge; and Ruth dropped upon her knees, cowering down under cover of her cloak beneath the sheltering wall of the parapet, till she looked all one with a heap of dry rubbish of leaves and old straw swept up close beside her. In another instant these tramps will have passed on. For tramps doubtless they are, bound for Newmarket. Respectable travellers would of course, at this late hour, have put up for the night at Hoddesdon. What even if they should

be footpads! and poor Ruth thinks longingly now of her comfortable little bedchamber. What guineas, if she owned them, would she give to find herself safe back in it! Hush! Hush! Already the span of the near bridge is resounding hollowly with their tread! Suddenly the sound ceases. The party has clearly come to a halt, and close upon her hiding-place; for though they speak in subdued and almost stealthy tones, every syllable is audible to her.

"There it is," said one voice.

"Ay," muttered another. "Roight enough. Let's be gettin' for'ard."

"Wait!" peremptorily commanded a third voice in soldier-like tones. "Don't let us make any mistake."

"Oons!" impatiently grunted the second speaker; "I tell you, colonel, 'tis the spot, if I knows it, and I were born here. Yonder stands the Rye House 'telle'e, and yonder to to'ther side o' the road—"

"Road!" interrupted the military voice rather contemptously, "you call it a road? Why 'tis scarce broad enough for a couple of broad-shouldered loons like you to walk abreast. Road forsooth!"

"King's highway, then," laughed the first speaker, whose accent was refined but disagreeably sarcastic.

A low chorus of laughter greeted this remark.

"That he'll be lying low enough upon," went on the first speaker, "before Oak Apple Day.

And is yonder gabled house the King's Arms, friend?"

"Ay it be, my Lord Howard."

"Forward then. Come, Walcot, if you've done mooning. What ails you, man? Staring at the water as if you saw your own double in it!"

"Do you see that?" hurriedly returned the soldier.

"See what?" and then ensued a sound of shuffling and scraping, as if the whole party was crowding to the side of the bridge.

"Why yes, for sure we does," said the native of the place, and whom Ruth recognized by his voice to be a workman in the malt-yard named Barber. "I doubt if each on us had but one eye apiece, like the measter's, we could see the moon a shoinin' on the stream."

Ruth breathed again.

"But there is no moon. 'Tis gone."

"Starlight, then."

"That is too faint to cast any such reflections," objected Colonel Walcot. "And see how it flashes: there! close up against the steps, as bright and sharp as forked lightning."

"Or a silver serpent," put in another voice.

"Or an eel," laughed Lord Howard; "come, colonel, let's push on."

"Nay, nay, bide a minute," cried another voice, which Ruth knew to belong to the foreman of the malting-yard. "The colonel's grace is right. There is summat lyin' in the stream. And 'tis nayther fire nor fish, and if I might be speakin'

out my moind afore your lordship's worship, I should say as 'tis for all the world like a swoord, or one o' they skewer sort o' murdrous wepn's—"

"A rapier do you mean?" said Howard.

"Noa, noa, my lord, not just that, but a new sort o' blood-spillin' invenshun that—"

"Save us!" shiveringly ejaculated the other maltster. "What if so be that 'tis a shadder, or some evil sperrit warnin' us of the wickedness of our ways, afore it be too late."

"Coward! white-livered loon!" savagely hissed Lord Howard. "What have we to do with shadows, who fear neither man nor—"

"Oh, oh! Hush, hush, my lord," interrupted a cringing unmelodious voice, "ye speak unadvisedly."

"So do you, Master Ferguson," wrathfully cried my lord, "as you'll find when we string up your lean crow's neck for you to Master Sheppard's sign yonder, if you don't keep your cant till we ask for it. Come, quick march."

Then with stealthy, but quick and measured tramp, the whole party passed on.

Cramped in every joint, for she had scarcely dared to draw breath, much less to stir, Ruth ventured now to raise one corner of her cloak, and peer after this strange company.

One by one she saw their black figures disappear from the flood of yellow light upon the road, within the deep porch of the inn.

Dizzy and bewildered with what she had just witnessed, she staggered to her feet, clinging for

support as she did so to the parapet. Her eyes, as she passed her hand across them to clear the mists that blinded them, caught a dim confused gleam of the object which had attracted the attention of the party. Within barely a dozen paces of where she stood, it lay; half way between the barge and the landing stage, forking and zig-zagging just under the sluggish movement of the water.

A sharp-pointed cruel-looking blade of some description; but though Ruth, thanks to Master Lockit's instructions, could tell you a dagger from a sword, and a rapier from either, a vast deal better than some folks could, she was not able to give a name to this three-edged knife, with its short dagger-shaped hilt of wood that stuck up slantwise high and dry out of the water, among the white rush stamens. One like that she had never seen. No great marvel, however, if she had not, for the pattern was of quite recent French devising, and hardly likely so soon to have found its way into a peaceful little Hertfordshire hamlet, in the ordinary course of events; but Ruth, as she bent over the water's edge with eyes fixed on the thing, felt sure that something extra-ordinary was going on about and around her. Something too fearful to guess at. Never a doubt that this sword or spear, or whatever might be its hateful name, was the thing which the man Rumsey had let slip from his bundle on leaving the barge. That like one viper of its poisonous brood, the thing was but one of more of its kind,

was equally clear. But come what might, thought Ruth, its own special and individual chances of fulfilling the fearful end it was fashioned for, should not be left it; and stealing down by the parapet, and along by the water's edge till she reached the spot, she knelt and stretched forward her hand, grown cold as death, but steady and straight to its purpose; and seizing the hilt of the weapon, dragged it, dripping with the diamond bright drops from the water, under her cloak. Then casting one keen glance round, and upwards towards the inn, she sped along the bank, never stopping till she reached the postern.

CHAPTER VII.

MISTRESS SHEPPARD DOES NOT CARE FOR HER GUESTS.

ISTRESS SHEPPARD was almost as perfect a specimen of a landlady, as her establishment was a model of an inn; for who has not heard of that famous King's Arms, within whose snug shelter Master Isaak Walton loved to rest and sup, with a friendly gossip after his day's angling in the waters of the "Silver Lea," which almost washed the ancient hostelry's walls?

Decidedly, even to her very little tempers, Mistress Sheppard was a model of her class. When the world wagged to her liking, her plump peony cheeks so dimpled over with smiling good-humour, and her voice, albeit always a trifle shrill, was so kindly, that you experienced some difficulty in bringing yourself to believe, what nevertheless was true, that the face could look thunderously black, and the voice set your teeth on edge with its vinegar sharpness.

In justice, however, it ought to be added that

sunshine prevailed in Mistress Sheppard's nature, and the storms threatened only when she had what she called her "reasons" for them. If Sheppard called them "prejudices, unaccountable prejudices," he only did so when she was safe out of earshot.

To his great vexation and discomfiture, the clouds hang very heavy on his wife's brow to-night. It is clear she does not like these guests who have sought the inn's hospitality; and when the party arriving by road, passes through into the parlour, she sits contemplating its door, which is close shut by the one who last enters, in grim meditative silence.

"I don't know whose looks I care for least among 'em," she muttered, as at last she slowly turned to fill the tankards of ale they had ordered. "Eyes on a more hang-dog crew I never set. With the brims o' their hats as hollow as cabbage leaves, as if they was ashamed o' their own ugly faces; as well they may be, and downright afeard to be seein' what mine was like. Why, I give you my word, there wasn't one o' the lot looked my way, to give me so much as a civil good e'en, as they passed. That's manners for you!"

"Hush!" whispered Sheppard, imploringly, and casting nervous glances towards the guest-parlour, as Mistress Sheppard's tones ran up the gamut, till they ended in a shrill treble. "Hush! There's a dear woman. Walls have ears."

"And so much the better if they have; for then they'll be knowin' a piece o' my mind."

"Ah, hush! hush! If the gentlemen should overhear—"

"Gentlemen, quotha! gentlemen!—"

"Ay; there's a live lord among 'em."

"Live lord is there! Then, beshrew me, if it's at court he learnt his manners. Our dame-school brats know 'em better. Why his sacred majesty—"

"Ah, hush! hush!" agonizedly entreated Sheppard.

"What should I hush for? His own sacred majesty, I say, always bids me a 'God save you, Mistress Sheppard!' from his coach-door when his coach pulls up here to change horses; and once—well I remember it—his own royal fingers chucked me under the chin. No, I don't say you was by and saw him do't; but he did. Well, well, what's your fine lord's name? Bless the man; can't you speak out? mumblin' as if you hadn't got a tooth in your head! Howard o' what?"

"Escrick. Lord Howard of Escrick."

"M'ph!" murmured Mistress Sheppard, cogitatively tapping her plump finger tips on the table. "'Tis a good name, and a proud, is Howard. But your whitest flock's got its black sheep, they say. And now I think on't, 'twas but t'other day—though I don't at this minute recollect the hows and the wheres—somebody that was in here, was tellin' of me that there wasn't a daring profligate among all the quality like this same Howard of Escrick, an' not a shred o' principle or honesty in him."

"An' what's all that to us?" said Sheppard, with a feeble attempt at bravado, as he marshalled the tankards on his tray. "The best thing you can do, is to give me the bottle o' Canary he's ordered; an' be quick about it. There's a good woman. Anyhow you've no call to complain of his honesty; for hasn't he paid his reckonin' a'ready? See if he hasn't." And Sheppard triumphantly threw down a gold piece. "Now what do you take him for?"

"A knave!" said Mistress Sheppard, pocketing the gold, however, "or else a fool; for he lacks credit, or wit, or both one and t'other who settles for his goods afore he's got 'em. There—there; be off with thee. Take em' what they want, and tell 'em the sooner they're all off these premises the better I shall like 'em. Bless the man! What's come to thee, now? Thy hands are shakin' like froze syllabub. Spillin' the ale all over the tray. Here—give it me; I'll carry it in."

Sheppard, however, was too quick for her. Ordinarily the less he bestirred himself, and the more his bustling active-minded wife did for him, even to the length of waiting personally on their guests, the better pleased he was; but now he absolutely pounced upon the tray, and carried it off at double quick trot, leaving Mistress Sheppard to stand looking after him in open-mouthed amazement, as he disappeared, closing the door of the guest-parlour carefully behind him.

"Hark! what was that?" Her ears, she thought, must have deceived her, rarely as they were given

to it. Or did the lock of the door click and the bolts scrape in their grooves as if stealthily moved?

Mistress Sheppard stepped tiptoe across to the door, and noiselessly grasping its handle, she turned it and pushed at it, but to no purpose. "I like not that," she said to herself, when after a second attempt she turned away, and resuming her post among her bottles and cups, sat with knitted brows and eyes keenly riveted on the sturdy old wainscoted walls opposite as if she would fain have penetrated to the scene they hid. "I like it not," and then she set her arms akimbo, and gave a prolonged inquiring sniff. "And never a suspicion of tobacco neither," and deeper and deeper gathered the frowns. "That bodes no good neither; for men must be ill at ease with themselves indeed, before they forget to make chimneys o' their mouths. And not a sound," and she held her breath and listened intently. "Not a sound!"

Not one, truly, that could reach her; for that score or so of men, seated about the large table placed across the room's upper end, all spoke in half-whispering undertones, and ceased abruptly as Sheppard entered with his tray.

"Bolt the door!" commanded the man seated at the head of the table.

"I crave pardon, Master Rumbold," began Sheppard, looking with a sickly smile from the speaker to the door, and back again to the speaker; "but my—my wife—"

"Exactly," interrupted Rumbold. "We don't need Mistress Sheppard's assistance in this business. It's bad enough already."

"Bolt the door! Dost hear, fellow?" said a handsome and richly-attired, but dissipated-looking man, with dark eyes and black-brown locks, who was seated next the maltster. "Bolt the door, and don't be all night about it."

"Ah, good lack! good lack!" feebly ejaculated Sheppard, no longer hesitating, and putting up the bolts as fast as his shaking fingers would let him. "Something gone wrong? Did you say something was gone wrong?" and he gazed in abject terror round the circle of gloomy faces, looming amid the shadows cast by the one oil-lamp hanging from the huge beam overhead, and which was all the light the room boasted. "What will become of us all now? I knew how 'twould be—I always said it would—"

"Thanks to you," said the dark-eyed man, with a malicious smile.

"Me!"

"Ay. My Lord Howard's right there," growled a stout thick-set man, somewhat far advanced in middle age, who sat near the fireplace, occupied in rubbing his shins with a tender hand. "It's all your infernal slippery banks we've to thank for it. Why the mischief can't you keep your garden banks in decent order?"

"Are you quite sure you don't mistake after all?" inquired Rumbold's neighbour of the last speaker, glancing down as he spoke at the sheaf

of three-sided short blades spread out fan-wise upon the table. "There are twelve here."

"Ay, but 'twas a baker's dozen, my lord," said another voice. "Thirteen, so he says—"

"And I suppose I'm not a liar, Master Goodenough," cried the stout soldier, glowering sullenly at the individual who had hazarded the last observation. "Nor a cowardly idiot neither, like some folks here." Then he set to rubbing again at his damaged limb.

"Oh! the gracious powers forbid!" laughed Lord Howard, lifting his white jewelled hand, "we're all brave and honourable men here, surely. And vastly too clever to split like a bundle of twigs about nothing at all."

"Nothing!"

"Ay, less than nothing; for by my faith, Master Rumsey, I should be inclined to count this loss a fine omen. Thirteen's an unlucky number, so old wives say. And twelve of the things is enough in all conscience."

"And too many to my thinking," approvingly nodded Goodenough.

"Even if forced to extremes," continued Howard, "why, one of these sharp little Frenchmen here," and he began handling one of the blades as he spoke, and laid it lightly across his finger, "would do all the business in a twinkling. What say you, Master Rumbold?"

"That," answered Rumbold, breaking silence at last, "is not the point."

"No, by my faith! 'Tis but the edge," cried

Lord Howard, with a grimace of sudden pain, and hastily throwing down the weapon, "the foul fiend's own grindstone must have sharpened the confounded blade!" And dragging his gossamer-laced handkerchief from his pocket, he wound it round his hand.

"Has it drawn blood, my lord?" timorously asked Goodenough, turning pale, and craning his neck forward.

"Ay, has it, Master Sheriff," replied Howard, holding up his hand, and displaying its crimson-dyed cambric swathing, "and this helps but little to staunch it. Thanks, Master Lee," he went on, as Lawrence Lee, approaching from an obscure corner, took the wounded hand in his, and bound his own stout white linen handkerchief deftly about it; "I had better not have been quite so quick to meddle with it. Have a care what you are doing," he added, as Lee turned to replace the blade beside the rest. "Take warning by my fate."

CHAPTER VIII.

MOONRAKERS.

"SAY," doggedly began Rumbold, and taking no more notice of Lord Howard's mishap than if it had not occurred, "that this must be found, and before morning, else it will betray us."

"Oh! we're betrayed! We're betrayed!" shrieked Sheppard, at the top of his small voice.

"Silence, idiot!" said Rumbold, turning on him sternly; "and it is quite clear," he continued, "that it must be lying somewhere between this house and the river, since Colonel Rumsey is certain that when he stepped out of the boat he had it safe in the canvas bundle."

"I'll swear to that," said Rumsey.

"Now the garden has been thoroughly searched"—"Every inch of it," chorused half-a-dozen voices.

"And that being the case," said the tall soldier, advancing from the hearth, where he had been standing gazing meditatively into the dying embers, "perhaps you will find it worth your while to heed now what I told you on the bridge. You may search in the garden till you're all blind. I

tell you the thing fell into the water. Come, gentlemen," he went on, turning to those of the party who had accompanied him, "I am not after all, you see, such a moonraker as you would have made me out, when I told you I saw something shining in the water as we came by."

"Truly you did say so, Colonel," humbly admitted those he addressed.

"Verily we should not have contemned his assurance," ejaculated the snuffling tones of Master Ferguson, as he clasped his clawlike fingers, and turned upwards the ferret eyes gleaming beneath a wig almost concealing his mean little forehead; "for of a surety the hand of Providence is with those who put their faith—"

"In the water. Just beyond a little two-oared boat moored to a landing-stage at the bridge foot."

"Verily, I think we may place our confidence and credence—" once more began the snuffling tones; but they were interrupted by Lawrence Lee. "Never mind that now, Master Ferguson," he said. "The best thing to be done is to go to work and rescue this tell-tale knife before any prying eyes have been beforehand with us."

"Ay, well said!" cried Lord Howard. "Have with you, then, Master Lee. Come, friend," he went on, addressing Sheppard, "down with your bolts again."

But Sheppard hesitated, casting appealing glances round. "Why, what ails the fellow now?" demanded Howard; "first he hesitates

at putting them up, and now he won't take them down!"

"Mistress Sheppard—my—my wife!" stammered the unfortunate man. "She—that is, so please your lordship's worship's grace, she's such a wide-awake—"

"What the mischief! Isn't she a-bed yet?" laughed Howard. "Come, come, landlord, I'm afraid you rule your house sadly amiss."

"I—I don't rule it, my lord. 'Tis Miss—Mistress Sheppard who—who—"

"He speaks true enough there, my lord," said Rumbold grimly.

"Yes, yes," gasped the poor man in tones of relief; "Master Rumbold—he'll answer for me I speak nothing but the truth. Mistress Sheppard—she's always the last in the place to go to bed. She likes—that's what she says, my lord—likes to see all safe first. And sure as a gun, she's posted outside there in the passage. And—and if the whole—whole gang of us goes swarming out by the door here, like bees out of a hive, she'll be following us to see what we're after—and—and—"

"Quite true," nodded Rumbold; "and by midday the whole parish will be twittering the tale."

"Oh, these women!" groaned Howard; "they must always be meddling. Well, what's to be done, then? Shall we go hunting in couples, or one at a time?"

"'Tis not to be risked," said Sheppard, shaking

his head. "You see, my lord—saving your lordship's presence and yours, gentlemen"—he added, blinking his small eyes uneasily round on the circle of his guests, who had risen to their feet, impatient to begin the search, "Mistress Sheppard doesn't seem to have taken much of a fancy, so to speak, to a man-jack of the lot of you. Don't like the looks o' you, she says. And I'd sooner be a mouse within sight of our cat Tiger than havin' Mistress Shep—Sheppard—"

"Smell a rat," rather ruefully laughed Howard. "Well, what's the remedy?"

"This," said Lee, who, having left the group collected near the door, now stood beside a broad lattice, looking from a recess near the hearth into the garden, and commanding a view of the bridge. "It gives upon the bowling-green, and then down by the slope to the water. Out with you!" and unhasping the lattice pane as he spoke, he pushed it open. "Only, for your lives, step softly, softly!" and he placed his finger warningly on his lips.

"This way," whispered Walcot, when, in less than three minutes' time, the whole party, including the limping Rumsey, stood out upon the velvet smooth turf. On they crept, in single file, till they stood upon the edge of the shelf of tall bracken, where, stooping down, they dispersed along the bank close down by the water's brink. "'Twas just hereabouts," said Walcot in a loud whisper. "There! there! Stop a bit. No. Now I think on't, 'twas of course farther along—close by the barge."

"Here! I have it!" cried one in a voice of smothered but gleeful triumph. "Alack! it was but the battered handle of an old tin pot;" and in dire vexation he dashed it down again.

For a good half-hour the search was continued, until, wet through with their wadings and dabblings, some showed signs of giving in. Others swore they would not budge till they had found the missing thing.

"Then I take it we may as well part company at once," yawned Lord Howard, "for it's washed away into mid-stream long before now, depend on it. Come, Master Lee, what say you? I'll dare swear you know something of the water's soundings hereabouts."

"I think 'tis likely enough, my lord," answered Lawrence, catching Lord Howard's attack of yawning.

"Then let it lie, and be hanged to it!" and the nobleman sauntered back up the slope.

One or two of the party now proposed to return to the inn and proceed with the business which had brought them together; but Rumbold shook his head. "It is too late," he said: "three nights hence we will meet again."

"Oh! but not here," piteously entreated Sheppard. "Not here, Master Rumbold; don't say it's to be here. I never should hear the last of it; I shouldn't indeed!"

"Peace with thy craven tongue!" said the maltster with one of his grim smiles. "No, boys," he added, turning to the rest; "not here:

yonder at my own house, where last we met, in the Warder's Room."

And with a gesture of farewell he left them, while Lee betook himself home in his boat.

The rest, not without bestowing a good many muttered left-hand compliments on the fumble-footed Rumsey, separated in much the same order as they had come,—some by the barge, which soon lost itself among the mists of the river, others making their way on foot by the Rye to Hoddesdon and the neighbourhood.

It was, however, with difficulty that Colonel Walcot's companions could drag him from the bridge.

"Come along, Colonel," urged one; "you see you were wrong after all. There's not a thread of a gleam anywhere. Eh! see, 'tis all as dark as pitch."

"Ay," sighed Walcot, slowly moving on at last, "dark, dark enough."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE MALT-YARD.

THE postern was still on the latch when Ruth reached it. Alas! she had anticipated no less. That it was locked, was no longer one of her fears. She would have sooner her father had detected her midnight flitting now, and come upon her face to face. Anything sooner than that he should have been one of that terribly strange company. All, however, was still around and within. Not even the watch-dog uttered a sound, for he knew her step, and fawned at her feet as she passed; and safe and unseen by other eye than his she reached the end of the corridor, casting a glance as she stole across the floor at Maudlin, who to all appearance had not stirred.

Safe at last in the shelter of her own room, Ruth sank breathless and spent into a chair· and, overcome by the fatigue and excitemer'. of the long day's pleasures and pains, she fell into what must have been a sort of long fainting unconsciousness, or else it was real honest sleep that stole upon her unawares.

All she ever knew of it was, that when she opened her eyes again the sunbeams were flooding her room, and the gatehouse clock chiming. Six it must have been, since outside in the malting-yard she could hear the stir and voices of the men getting to their work. Pressing her chilled fingers upon her aching eyelids, she gazed round, striving to collect her dazed senses; and the events of the past night, as they came back to her mind, seemed like some bad dream. She sat up and threw back the heavy cloak still covering her shoulders with an impatient hand, as if she would have thrust the ugly fancies away with it; but a sudden clash and clatter at her feet recalled her thoroughly to herself, and she started up in dismay.

It was caused by the falling of the steel blade which her sudden movement had displaced from the folds of her cloak; there, glittering dazzlingly bright in the sunshine, it lay upon the floor.

Spell-bound, Ruth gazed at it, much in the way that people are forced, in spite of themselves, to stare at some poisonous brilliant-eyed reptile crossing their path. Yet this was not altogether Ruth's case. If anyone could have looked into her face then they would have seen in it no vacant, helpless stare, but a dawning, deep thoughtfulness, whose perplexity yielded gradually to an expression of strong determination, as though she had come to a decision on some knotty point she had been discussing with herself.

Only the clock, however, striking seven roused her from her abstraction. So late! and approach-

ing the window she opened its panes and let in the pure morning air. Then she proceeded to make a fresh toilette. With a little sigh yesterday's gay tiffany was laid aside, poor, crumpled, bedraggled stuff that it all looked now, and she put on a gown of gray camlet, from beneath whose skirts, just reaching to her ankles, peeped forth a pair of little feet, in a pair of stout plain black leathern tagged shoes; just the very things for rough country roads and boggy lanes. The neat-fitting bodice was finished by a kerchief of spotless lawn gathered close about her neck, and though fashionable ladies would no doubt have vowed it an odiously grand-mothery sort of thing, it was none so unbecoming. Indeed as Ruth proceeded to fasten that black silk caped hood beneath her little round chin, it was quite a matter of nice taste, whether Queen Ruth, rosy as her regal robes and crown, and bright as her gay dancing glances could make her, or this demure, pale little Ruth, clad in sober gray, and with great wistful eyes, somewhat heavily shadowed, indeed, with purple lines, were the prettier.

Small doubt of Master Rumbold's opinion on the matter did there seem to be, when ready equipped, even to a large basket upon her arm, she stood before him with the black jack of ale, that always made his breakfast. "Now thou look'st thyself, Ruth," he said, his brooding brow lightening as he gazed at her. "Why dost thou sigh, child?" he went on, taking the jack and putting it to his lips.

"Did I sigh, father?" and all unconsciously poor Ruth sighed again, for never in her life had it seemed to her that she had felt less herself.

"Ay, didst thou. Well, well. Thou'rt thy father's own daughter now: kiss me then," he went on, setting down the empty jack and wiping his lips. "And where art thou bound for so early?" he added.

"Nether Hall, father."

"Nether Hall! why, 'tis but a round o' the clock that thou wert there," he said, opening his one eye more in surprise than displeasure.

"Madam Lee," began Ruth rather hesitatingly, and blushing, though she scarcely knew why, for it was but pure and simple truth she was speaking, "Madam Lee promised me a sitting of the white bantam hen's eggs yesterday, if—if," and she glanced down at her basket, "I liked to go and fetch them."

"And are the white bantam's eggs as big as the giant bird's in the fairy tale, that you must be taking a basket for them half as big as yourself?"

"Nay, father. But Madam Lee promised me also some choice green goose—goose—"

"'Tis Madam Lee is the goose to be spoiling thee so," smiled Rumbold good-humouredly. "She always is promising thee some fine thing or another. Well, well, go thy ways then, Ruth, for the green gooseberries, and a pleasant walk, and if by hap thou shouldst chance across Lawrence Lee,—and 'tis possible that, eh?"

"Yes, father."

"Tell him to—but yet,—no. Tell him naught; 'twill keep. I shall be seeing him shortly." And then Rumbold turned in at a door of the corn chambers.

CHAPTER X.

THE MEETING ON THE FOOT-BRIDGE.

AKING a short cut round by the moat, and crossing the stile above the King's Arms, Ruth soon gained the river towing-path.

As the sights and sounds of the new day greeted her, she felt a little cheered. One must have been wretched indeed not to have found an agreeable distraction in the blithe bird chorus overhead, and the buzzing of the insects in the young grass studded with the early summer flowers, whose brilliant hues mirrored themselves in the clear water rippling up into tiny bays to her very feet.

What a bright merry world it was! How hard to think that it had in it any such thing as sorrow, or sin, or cruelty, or—and ere the shadow of the sad word could flit across her thoughts, a butterfly fell at her feet, and fluttering its poor bruised wings for a moment, lay motionless on the flinty path.

It was quite dead; and Ruth bent down, and gently placing it on a fresh young dock-leaf, laid it beneath a whitethorn bush, well hidden from

all tread of hob-nailed shoes and ruthless plough-boy fingers; and leaving the soft west wind sweeping low through the sedge, to sigh it a dirge, she pursued her way, till a turn of the path brought her within sound of rushing water, and in a few minutes she reached a rough foot-bridge composed of one plank with a hand-rail of hazel-bough, which was thrown across a little rivulet, thickly screened at its furthermost end by a copse of elder and hazel bushes. Into this cool retreat a posse of old mother sheep had penetrated with their lambs, and lay in soft white heaps down to the water's very brink, not in the least put about at the apparition of Ruth, as she came to a standstill in the middle of the bridge to watch the pranks of the lambs with a half amused, half absent smile.

So absorbed was she, that the touch of a hand laid ever so gently on her shoulder caused her to start with surprise.

"Lawrence!" she exclaimed, for he it was.

"Ay, Lawrence!" he answered; "and good-morrow to you, Ruth! Were you coming to the Hall?"

She nodded.

"To be sure then," he went on, "some good angel brought me by the copse, instead of going round by the weir, for in that case I should have missed you."

"And where were you going?" asked she.

"Waltham," he replied, after a momentary hesitation.

"But this is not the way to Waltham."

"Nay, is it not?" he said, with well-assumed carelessness; "all the same, I am right glad I came it, since I have met you upon it, Ruth dear."

"That is fine talking," pouted Ruth; "but you're not telling me the truth, Lawrence. You weren't going to Waltham."

"Wasn't I?" returned the young man, flushing a little. "Well, look here, my dear, people who ask no questions, hear no lies. I doubt I may go where I list, without Mistress Ruth Rumbold's leave," and then he made a pretence of being about to stalk on; but the attempt was a sorry failure, breaking down instantly as he saw the tears brimming up into the eyes so persistently fixed on the silly lambs. "Ruth," he whispered, as in a moment he was beside her again; and taking her chin in his hands, he turned her face up to his, "come, let's kiss and be friends. Eh, shall we? You know I'd not vex you for—for—a king's ransom. Indeed I did not mean to vex you, only —there, it was so plaguy inquisitive of you, don't you know, to—there, never mind; what have you got in this basket?" concluded he, turning the conversation, like the wise diplomatist he thought himself.

"Now who's inquisitive, I wonder?" cried Ruth, folding her arms tight down upon the lid of the basket, and breaking into a saucy smile, which, however, faded in an instant. "Lawrence, where were you going? Tell me, dear."

"If you'll tell me what you've got in that bas-

ket, perhaps I may," laughed he. "Come, is it a bargain, Mistress Pry?"

"Yes, Mr. Pry."

"To Hoddesdon, then. There, I hope you're happier for the information."

"Not happier; no, Lawrence," she answered very slowly. "Wait a bit now," she went on, as he laid aggressive hands on the basket. "To Hoddesdon! What for?"

"Oh, come now, that's not in the bond. Why, nothing; nothing, little woman, that you know anything about."

"But I want to know," insisted she, still valiantly protecting the basket's most vulnerable points; "that's just it, I want to know."

"Then want must be your master," he said angrily. "Little girls must not know everything," he added, mending his rude speech, and seizing basket, and Ruth, and all in his arms.

"I'm not a little girl any longer," she cried, struggling to free herself, and digging her pink nails ever so hard into his bronzed wrists, till he decided to loosen his hold.

"No, you're a little wild kitten, with the sharpest claws in the world; that's what you are," he said; "but it won't do, I'm master."

"'Tis no good you're going to Hoddesdon for," she said bluntly, looking up into his laughing eyes, "or you'd tell me when I ask you, without all this silly nonsense. You never kept a secret from me before, Lawrence."

"Perhaps I never had one to keep."

"But now?"

"Hang it! you'd try a saint's temper," growled he, wrinkling his brows into a most unsanctified frown, and letting her go with such a sudden abruptness that she stumbled a little, and in the effort to maintain her footing on the narrow plank the basket slipped from her arm, and would have fallen into the water had not Lee caught it, with a dexterous turn of his wrist.

"See now, Ruth," he said, as he restored it to her, his eye grown radiant again in his pride at his clever legerdemain, "if you're not at my mercy after all. Might I not have been revenged for your refusal, and helped myself to a peep into this mighty particular basket, if I wasn't honour bright from top to toe?"

"But you are, Lawrence, aren't you?" challenged she, with a strange earnestness, that sent his eyes, which were gazing into hers, back to the basket; "and evil be to him who evil thinks," she went on. "And—"

"Oh, plague take it!" he interrupted impatiently; "what are you driving at? Now for the basket. Come."

"You really care to see inside it?"

"Not a straw, my dear child," he said loftily. "'Tis full of emptiness, I daresay. That's just what delights you girls more than anything; teasing and tantalizing a fellow all about nothing."

"Ay, but there is something in it. Something I was bringing to the Hall on purpose to show you, and—and to ask your opinion about. And

yet—and yet—" she went on wistfully, "I hope you won't be able to—to give me one."

"Why, my dear girl," rejoined he with a superior smile, "how mighty mysterious we are, to be sure!"

"'Tis a fearful-looking thing, let me tell you," she said, gingerly raising one corner of her basket lid.

"Some queer fish, is it?—out of the river?" he asked eagerly, for he was a mighty fisherman.

"Out of the river," nodded she.

"A pike of some sort perhaps."

"Yes, I should say, of some sort."

"You dear, splendid, diamond of a girl," ecstatically cried Lawrence, "as I live 'tis a pike! can't I see it gleaming?" and he clutched at the concealing hay—"a big silver pike!"

"No, a steel one," she said, as the weapon lay exposed in all its nakedness, and steadily she lifted her eyes to his face.

It had grown ashen white, and he staggered back for support against the bridge rail. "Ruth!" he gasped, as the handful of hay dropped from his powerless fingers and floated away on the swirl of the stream, "what is the meaning of this?"

"That you must tell me, Lawrence."

"Where did you find it?" he went on.

"In the river. The river Lea. Close by the water steps in Mistress Sheppard's garden. And when? Last night, while you were in the King's Arms, talking to those men. The men," she went on in steady tones, though he was biting his lip,

and his pale face flushed painfully, "who were there; instead of going straight home, as you ought to have done—"

"Ought!" angrily interrupted he; "and who made you spy over me?"

"I wasn't spying. I was only—taking a peep, just a little peep at—at the boat."

"Boat?".

"The *Queen Ruth*," Lawrence dear.

"And since you set such store by honour bright and 'oughts,' and all that sort of thing all at once, what business had you to be abroad all in the dark when your father had bidden you go indoors?"

She coloured a little. "I did go in," she answered after a moment's silence. "Only—only—"

"Only you came out again, that's all," he said with a low mocking laugh. "Ruth, Ruth! what possessed you to do such a thing?"

"I was ill at ease, Lawrence," she said, colouring deeper still. "I feared—nay, I do not know what I feared. But I could not stay in the house. Its air stifled me. I could not breathe. I thought—I fancied—nay, something has seemed so amiss with everything—with father and you, Lawrence, with you for these long, long weeks past. I have fancied—"

"Psha! Fancies indeed!" he cried with an impatient twitch of his lips, and turning from her, he stood and gazed with lack-lustre eyes into the water.

"And you're not a bit like the old Lawrence. And all day yesterday you—never mind. Lawrence, what do those dreadful men want here?"

He turned his face and gazed broodingly into hers, following the direction of her eyes as they fell again on the contents of the basket. "Bringing their horrid—what is the thing called?"

"A bayonet," he answered curtly.

"Their horrid bayonets here; and dropping them all over the place?"

"Well," he said with a faint smile, "they didn't do that purposely, be sure. 'Twas an accident. A stupid, infernal—"

"Oh, Lawrence! Fie, now! For shame, sir!" and Ruth's little hand shut up his lips.

"An awkward little mistake, then," he went on, "of that clod-hopping—never mind names, Ruth."

"Rumsey," said Ruth; "I heard father call him so—Colonel Rumsey."

CHAPTER XI.

"HE DIED FOR HIS KING."

USH!" whispered Lawrence, gripping her fast by the arm, and looking hurriedly round. "And—well, what more did you hear? Tell me the truth now."

"Lawrence," she said, timorously following his glance, "I want to tell it you. But 'twas all such a confusion. Just a word here and there; yet, oh, Lawrence! such fearful ones; of their own evil ways, and of—of killing—of killing! Oh! shake your head if you like; but they did, I tell you. And then some one said something about—think, Lawrence—about the king."

"Ay?"

"And of laying him low upon his own highway. Think of it;" and Ruth shivered in the bright sunshine.

"They were full, it seems, of their merry jests, these roystering gentlemen," said Lee.

"Nay, I like not such jests; and I'd not have you joining in them, nor my father neither," she said.

"Oh! but he's their arch-jester," cynically laughed Lawrence. "We're a merry company, we boys, my dear."

But there was little enough of mirth in the young man's face, as he stood there gazing across the level meadows, and up at the sailing clouds, and in fact everywhere excepting into the clear, earnest eyes of his companion as she came near and laid her hand gently on his arm. "Lawrence, you bid me speak truth just now," she said, "and to my best I did; for I would scorn to tell a lie, and least of all to you. But it is not so you are serving me, sir, your old, old friend Ruth. You are hiding something from me. Oh! but you are. Something that troubles you; and that is not kind of you."

"Least said, soonest mended," he said, but in softened tones, and gently withdrawing his arm from her grasp. "There are things done in this world not good for such as you are to be told about, Ruth dear. Tell me," he added, pointing to the basket, "does your father know anything of all this?"

"No; I lacked the courage to anger him when he looked so kindly on me this morning; and besides, I—well, I thought first I would speak with you about it, Lawrence."

"That is well," answered Lee; "and for thy life, Ruth, do not tell him. Do you understand—eh? It would be betraying such—such terrible tales of these eavesdroppings of yours, letting such naughty cats out of bags. Eh?

wouldn't it, now? Do not tell a single soul; do you hear, child?" and he gripped her by the arm till his fingers left their marks on it. "Promise. 'Tis of course but a mere trifle," he went on with ill-feigned unconcern. "Not worth our wasting our breath upon. But still, if I were in your place I'd tell nobody. Not a soul, dear heart! Eh?"

"That is as it may be," demurely answered she.

"But I command!" he cried sternly. "I forbid you to do it, do you hear? I'll have no conditions."

"Ay, but I will," she said, resolutely setting her lips.

"Ruth, child! Ruth!" he said in the agony of his desperation; "you don't know what you're saying. 'Tis playing with fire—with edged tools."

"Ay, indeed," she said, with another glance at the bayonet.

"'Tis a matter of life and death."

"And yet this moment you called it a silly trifle," she said, lifting her eyes reproachfully to his flushed face.

"Death! Do you want to drive me mad?" he cried through his clenching teeth. "I tell you, girl, if your foolish, gossiping tongue should let slip one syllable of what you saw and overheard last night, it would be a hanging matter for your father and for me."

"Lawrence, Lawrence!" gasped the terrified girl; "why? what for?"

"What for?" echoed he with heaving breast. "Do you know what this disobedience of yours has done?—undone, I mean. Shall I tell you?"

"Lawrence! what, what?"

"The good of a whole nation. That is what these gentlemen and your father—"

"And you, Lawrence?" interrupted she.

"Ay, I suppose so;" and his voice fell slightly. "That is what we were plot—arranging."

"And to be hanged for doing so much good? Oh! no, no. His majesty would never allow that," said Ruth with an incredulous shake of her head. "He is so generous, so kind! Why do you shiver like that? and how dare you shake your head? I say the king is—"

"Hold your peace, child! You don't know what you're talking about. 'Tis just Charles who has to be—to be got rid of."

"Got rid of?" gasped Ruth. "How—what—"

"Nay, we have not got so far yet as that. Maybe he'll have to be shipped across channel, or —yes, put in some safe place."

"Prison?"

"Nay, now, you're such a downright one!" winced Lawrence petulantly. "Well, prison, then, if you like. Words break no bones."

"But deeds cut off heads!" sobbingly burst forth Ruth. "That's how they served our martyred king."

"Psha! Martyred!" sneered Lawrence.

"First they put him in prison, and then they murdered him."

"Well, make your mind easy, child," said Lawrence. "That's not the plan this time anyhow. 'Tis quite a different sort of one."

"Then there is a plan?"

"Something of one; though hang me if I can make head or tail of it!" he said wearily. "They jangle over it so. One's for this way, and one for that."

"And you, Lawrence?"

"I serve but to count with, child. Master Rumbold would have me in it," he said with a shrug.

"And after some poor fashion he has you; but not your heart, I doubt," said Ruth.

"Nay; perhaps I had not it to spare," he said, gazing down with rather a sad smile at her sweet, attent face, which was brightening a little; "and if I consented to be one of their lot, it was but to keep friends with him."

"'Twould have been more friendly of you to have been his enemy," sighed Ruth. "Had he asked such a thing of me, I would have defied him. Ay, but I would, Lawrence. Mayhap an 'I'll turn no such traitor, Master Rumbold!' from you, Lawrence, would have saved him from this falling back into the old terrible ways. When I think," shudderingly went on Ruth, "that my father—my kind, loving father, who calls me ladybird, and such sweet, merry names—was the same who stood guard by King Charles's block, and looked on while his bleeding head fell, it makes me dream such dreadful dreams that I start up screaming

in my sleep. Lawrence, I would you had defied him."

"He would never have spoken to me again, Ruth, if I had," answered the young man; "and he would have forbidden me ever to see you, or speak to you again."

She was silent for a few moments. "And better so," she said at last.

"You wouldn't mind, Ruth," he said bitterly. "It wouldn't matter a scrap to you if you never saw me again. I know that;" and he turned away.

"It would matter very much," she answered. "I think my life—my outside life—would feel like this little stream here, when the winter comes, and the flowers and the sunshine are all gone—"

"Dear child! Dear Ruth!"

"But," she went on, gently pushing away the hands he was stretching out to her—"but still in my heart there would have been sunshine; because I could have thought of Lawrence Lee as an honourable man, and not as a traitor. What would Madam Lee think of you, Lawrence, if she knew this that I know?"

"Hush!" he murmured, closing his eyes and knitting his brows.

"And your father," she went on; "he was of no such poor flimsy stuff. He died for his king; true to the death."

"He believed in him," said Lawrence. "For my part—well, I speak as I hear, Ruth. His

worst enemies never denied Charles the First had his good points; but the best friends of Charles the Second say 'tis difficult to find his; and as for his faults, he's as full of them as—"

"As you are, or any other mortal man. Come, tell me, you silly boy, you, do you think that if these gentlemen—these fine 'friends' of yours, who want to be rid, as you call it, of His Majesty —were ruling England in his place, the country would fare happier? For my part," went on Ruth, when no response from Lawrence appeared to be forthcoming, "I doubt my father would make a rare stern tyrant. And as for you, Lawrence—" but something in this notion suddenly upset all Ruth's sober eloquence, and it rippled away in a peal of merry laughter.

"I see nothing ludicrous in it," said Lawrence grimly.

"No indeed," said Ruth, regaining her gravity, "'tis no laughing matter."

"Come, Ruth, if you have quite done your sermonizing, let us part friends at least."

"That is at an end," she said, settling her disarranged hood, and, drawing the handles of her basket well up to her elbow, she turned her face homewards.

"But you were going to the Hall?" he said.

"I was," she replied; "but I cannot face Madam Lee and think what you have become. Fare you well, Lawrence!"

"Ah, silly child! what should you know about

politics? This comes, now, of meddling in things you don't understand," he said fractiously.

"'Tis not I who have meddled with them," she said; "and I would give my gold and garnet brooch they had not come within a hundred miles of Stanstead."

"Psha! Go your foolish, obstinate ways, then, Ruth. Stay, first give me the basket."

"Give it you? Well, well," she went on; "now I think of it, 'tis yours, I suppose. For old Diggory, your gardener, brought it over last week full of early potatoes—a present for father from Madam Lee. So take it, if you'll be troubled with it;" and, first extracting its contents, she handed it to Lee.

He dashed it furiously into the stream, sending the terrified sheep stampeding in all directions.

"This is too much," he said; "'twas the weapon I meant."

"That is not mine to give; and were it mine a million times over, I would not give it you. The deadly hateful thing; unless—" and taking it by its short handle, she laid its point to her heart.

"Mad girl!" he cried in agonizing amazement; "what would you do? Give it me. Do you hear?" and he started forward to seize it.

"Mind, Lawrence," she said, waving him back, "dare to lay a finger on it, and—"

"What—what—?"

"And I will tell all the world—that is to say, I will tell Mistress Sheppard, and that will serve just as well, of everything I heard and saw last

night. Say, Lawrence," and she half held the bayonet towards him, "which way is to be?"

Without a word he turned from her, and strode wrathfully, and pale as a ghost, away through the copse.

CHAPTER XII.

MOTHER GOOSE'S TALES.

LOVELIER spring than this one now passing into early summer had not been within living memory. Never had the trees budded more green and fresh-looking, and the roses and larkspurs shown more hurry to break forth and mingle their fragrance with the breath of the soft sweet air; and yet Ruth Rumbold's heart felt as wintry as if some load of ice-bound earth weighed it down.

Poor old Maudlin wondered sorely what ailed her pet, that she went about the place, doing her little household duties as carefully and deftly indeed as she always did do them, but not to the tune of her own sweet young voice, as her wont was. No, the child had grown silent as any stock and stone, and as grave—and that wasn't saying a little neither—as the master himself; and then Maudlin set about concocting a variety of messes and electuaries in the still-room with a view to restoring the roses to the pale cheeks, and charming back the lost music. And then, after all her trouble, to think that Ruth refused to swallow

a mouthful of her medicaments, and vowed that nothing ailed her—if only Maudlin would leave her to herself!

For three whole days this sort of thing has been going on; and to-night, tired out with her ineffectual expostulations, the old woman has gone off, not without dudgeon, to "get a mouthful of fresh air," as she says. And truly the atmosphere is heavy—as if a storm were not so far off—and to indulge in a little interchange of ideas in the gate-house parlour; for there you are always safe to pick up the latest news stirring, trifling and important, just as you would come upon it in the Mall or the Covent Garden coffee-houses.

And so Ruth is left to her musings; for though at the first glance you might call them studies, since one book of the little heap piled up on the broad ledge of the window where she is seated, lies open on her lap, you have but to look again, to see she is not reading it.

As, however, the sound of a heavy step descending the stairs falls upon her ear, she drops her eyes to the page, not even raising them again when the maltster enters, and crossing slowly to her side, stands gazing out absently into the rays of the setting sun, which are luridly firing the yew-tree peacock into a blaze of red and yellow.

Presently, however, he turned his eyes upon Ruth. "Does not the book please you?" he asked, pointing to the volume before her. "I see," he went on, when she looked up, but made no answer. "that you have not turned the page since you

opened it haphazard when I bid you be reading it half an hour ago. Or is it that the picture of the blessed martyrdom of Mistress Anne Askew so fascinates you?"

"'Tis a fearful thing!" said Ruth, shuddering, as she looked, for the first time, if truth must be owned, at the pictured page. "Poor Mistress Askew! She must have been a right brave lady."

"A bold Christian woman, rather," quickly corrected the maltster, "who counted her life for nought beside the truth."

"Truth is indeed a pure noble thing to live for," acquiesced Ruth.

"And to die for. Yes," said Rumbold; "that blessed work of Master Fox's is indeed a mighty treasure-house of the scores who have shed their blood for it."

"Ay," sighed Ruth, "'tis indeed a book of death, and ghastliness, and—"

"And wholesome teaching, and fitter far for thy recreation moments than all this farrago of chapbook trash I found you head over ears upon. Where did you get it?"

"I bought it of the old packman who came to the gatehouse yesterday morning; and a fine collection there was in his wallet," continued Ruth, her eyes waxing bright. "He had come straight by way of Bow and Waltham, and on here across the Rye, from the 'Looking Glass,' the big chapbookseller's shop that stands on London Bridge, father, dear, and he'd got *Reynard the Fox*, the sly wicked creature. Father, what an odious hypo-

crite he was—eh? And *Mother Bunch*, and *Jack and the Giants*—

> "'Fe! Fi! Fo! Fum!
> I smell the blood of an English—*mun!*
> Let him be alive, or let him be dead,
> I'll grind his bones—'"

"Tut! tut! tut!" frowned the maltster.

"To make my bread!" went on Ruth, absorbed in the vision of the valiant little Cornishman's attack on the three-headed monster. "Yes, and then there was *Tarlton's Jests*," she hurried on, all unconscious of the deepening frowns of Rumbold, "and *Guy of Warwick*, and—let me see, what came next? Why, to be sure, 'twas the *Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green*—'Pretty Bessee,' you know, father; and the history of the *Two Children in the Wood*, poor pretty dears! with a picture running all along atop of the page, showing all the sad woes they suffered, and ending up with the hanging of the cruel uncle. And then—well, I protest, there was such a heap, that I cannot remember them half. But I know he had *John Barleycorn*, because—well, father, it made me think"—and a merry smile rippled on Ruth's mobile lips—"of somebody we know, eh? and how they squeezed the poor old fellow to death. And then," chattered on Ruth, encouraged by the faint smile that dawned on the maltster's stolid face, "then there was *The World Turned Upside Down*. Well, I had half a mind for that; but just then I came upon this, and it looked the very

best of all, and as I—" Ruth hesitated to explain that her resources had not reached to the purchase of all the chap-books she had coveted, and the thrilling woodcuts of the one she now held towards him had carried the day with her. "Well, 'twill divert you, I'm sure, father, dear."

It was *The Seven Champions of Christendom!*

"Seven dunderheads!" frowned Rumbold, turning the book's pages with a contemptuous finger. "Harkye, Ruth," he continued, in stern tones, "not a groat more of pocket-money will I waste on you till you have learned to spend it something more discreetly than on trash like this. I had rather see my money at the bottom of the moat than frittered so. Pah! dragons, forsooth, and fair captive ladies! and knights-errant, and saints —beshrew them all! Mighty saints, I'll warrant me they were. Pagans in motley! Saint David of Scotland. If he set foot there now the presbytery would be for hanging him high as Holyrood tower. And Saint Patrick of Ireland, with his superstitious shamrock symbol, and Saint George of England."

"Merry England, father," corrected Ruth.

"Pah! pish! a seemly time this for England to be merry! when she needs bow her head even to the dust for the weight of her sins!" and he turned and threw the book angrily into the fire. "That for your chap-book saints!"

"Now," thought poor Ruth, "he would be as cruel to them, if they were real flesh and blood

men, as ever Bishop Bonner and Queen Mary were to the poor Protestant martyrs;" and silently, for she dared not trust herself to speak, she began to turn the pages of the volume on her knee; but Rumbold took it from her.

"Read no more," he said, "till your spirit is better attuned to such profitable instruction. Lay it by till to-morrow," he went on, in less harsh tones; "mayhap when you have slept on what you have read, and digested it—"

"I doubt I shall not do that," despairingly answered Ruth, "for the woodcuts alone would serve to give bolder hearts than mine a nightmare."

"And yet," went on Rumbold, softening still more at the notion that his favourite reading had impressed Ruth more strongly than he had at first assumed, "I do not think yours is lacking in courage. Your father's daughter would dare much in a righteous cause were she called upon to do it. Eh, Ruth?"

She did not answer; but sat gazing dreamily at the fire as it reduced the poor chap-book to a few filmy shreds. "But now, little one," went on the maltster, "to your room. Good-night!" and he bent and kissed her forehead.

"Nay, father!" she rejoined, looking up in surprise; "not good-night yet awhile. 'Tis hours too early."

"I like not thy trick of exaggerating," rebukefully said he. "One hour, and barely, for the clock has already struck seven—it may be sooner—"

"Yes, indeed," briskly interrupted she, "and I

am not for going to sleep at sunset, with the little chits of sparrows—"

"And magpies! You grow pert, mistress. Come!" sternly added Rumbold, "I'll have no more of the May-day wantonness we wot of. Do as I bid you."

"But, father—"

"Do you hear me?" thundered the maltster. "I desire to be alone. That is—I need not your company."

"'Twill be so lonesome for you," said Ruth; "I think it would have cheered you in this twilight time if—"

"I need it not, I tell you," quickly interrupted Rumbold. "I expect—visitors," and he coughed huskily.

"Visitors!"

"Ay; that is to say," stammered Rumbold, "it—it is possible."

"Visitors! and nothing prepared for them to eat!" cried the little housemistress aghast.

"They are not of the sort who set store by rich meats and costly wine-bibbing. They come—to confer with me, on—on important questions."

"Is it the price of grain, father? I heard Parson Alsides saying to Master Lockit only this very morning that it was at a most ruinous price—seventy shillings a quarter, he said; and that if the farmers and the employers—such as you, father, dear, and Lawrence Lee, I suppose, would but put their heads together to devise how it could be cheapened for the poor, 'twould be, he said, a right

blessed day's work, and a vast deal better than the hatching of all sorts of plots, and—"

"Eh! eh! eh! Parson Alsides is a chattering old sycophant, who is always prating for the pensions he gets out of the king's own privy purse. Though, mind you, child, I don't say I would not spare the matter consideration when more serious concerns allow me leisure."

"I hoped you had done with those for ever, father," said Ruth gravely; "'twas a serious concern, indeed, when poor King Charles was killed, and you—"

"I! how now?" cried Rumbold, turning sharply upon her. "What had I to do with that?"

"What had you not, father?" said Ruth, in tones of sturdy reproach. "Why, many's the time Maudlin has told me how you stood by and saw it done."

"And beshrew her chattering old tongue for her pains! I'd have had it cut out, had I caught her at her tales. 'Tis no fit one for your ears, Ruth," he added, in sad slow tones.

"Indeed, father; I could always stop them with my fingers when she begins about it; and yet still I must listen. 'Tis such a bitter-sweet story —poor king!"

"And yet," went on Rumbold, changing his mood, "after all, why should I be sorry to think that you know your father can look his duty in the face."

"Oh, father!" she began reproachfully.

"Let be, child," he interrupted, turning away,

and thrusting his hands gloomily down into his pockets, "'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,' saith the Scripture, 'do it with all thy might.' 'Tis enough."

"Indeed, indeed enough," said Ruth, stealing beside him, "and you will meddle no more in such things, eh, father?"

"And who told you I dreamed of doing so?" he demanded in unsteady and excited tones.

"You must rest and be comfortable," went on Ruth, twining her arms about his neck, and stroking his rugged face; "so snug here, isn't it, in our beautiful old Rye House? And you must be content to rest now, and have your little Ruth take care of you, and sing—for you say I have a tuneful voice, eh, dear—of the Land 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest,' and the gentle green pastures, and the godly hymns you taught me when I was a small thing you could dandle on your knee. Promise me, dear heart," she went on coaxingly, when Rumbold's only answer was an attempt to shake her off, "never to meddle more. Let the bad cruel-hearted men make their plots, for 'tis all their wits can reach to, I doubt. But for one like you, who can make such malt as is not to be found besides in all Hertfordshire, oh, I'd stick to it."

"And stick you to your churn and your wheel, Mistress Oracle," said the maltster, fondly stroking her soft brown hair, "and discourse not so glibly of what you do not understand a whit more than

your own frisky Tab there, who is tearing up your fine chap-books with her claws. What should kings, and such kittle cattle's doings be to you?"

"Nay, little enough," said Ruth, turning to rescue her precious books, and taking the destructive Tab in her arms, "though in truth sometimes I think I should like to see our King Charles," she went on, dreamily twiddling the kitten's ears.

"Have you not seen him many a time, silly child?" said Rumbold.

"In a fashion, ay, yes, as he has ridden by yonder in his coach, and his Grace of York too of course, but 'tis such a glimpse; just enough to set one caring to look him face to face. Have you ever done that, father?"

"No—yes—I scarcely know," frowned Rumbold.

"'Tis a right kind merry face, isn't it?"

"I see no such things in it," growled Rumbold; "an ordinary swarthy one enough to my thinking."

"Yet Goodman Speedwell, when he went up to London last year to sell his pigs, said 'twas a rare and gracious one, and a pure fine sight to see him playing with his little dogs in Saint James's Park, and feeding the ducks in the canal with his own royal hands. Oh, he must be a pleasant-humoured gentleman!"

"He's just a mortal man, I take it, very mortal, and when he's angered spares none, for all his fine forgetting and forgiving talk."

"There it is," said Ruth, "'tis scarce to be expected that he who has been so wronged, should

be so forgiving as the Bible would have us. Nowadays, if a man sin against his brother, and kings are our brothers, eh, father? in a fashion of speaking they are our elder brothers, eh, father, dear?"

"Beshrew thee, child," impatiently frowned the maltster, "what has come to you?"

"I say 'tis a stretch if that man shall be forgiven twice, that is what I am thinking of; and those who plotted the killing of Charles the First, and were pardoned, would scarce be let go a second time, if—if—" she faltered, and coloured deeply.

"If what, mistress?" sternly challenged Rumbold.

"If they should harbour ill thoughts against Charles the Second."

It was the maltster's turn to look aside, as she lifted her appealing eyes to his face. "Come, come," he said, "a truce to this silly chatter. Good-night; and hark you, give me the key of the communicating door between your chamber and the Warder's Room. Have it you about you?"

"Yes, father; here," and she disengaged one of the keys from the bunch hanging at her girdle, and handed it to him, wonderingly.

"Very good," he said, taking it from her and pocketing it, "'tis your own fault, for your carelessness, Ruth," he went on; "this morning was the second time I found that door ajar. If I find it so ever again, I'll have it walled up. For the present I'll hold the key in my keeping."

"But, father," protested Ruth, "Adam Lockit—"

"Adam Lockit grows stupid and deaf, and Diggles is but one remove from an idiot, and the arrantest coward breathing."

"Only about ghosts, father; you should see him lay about him with the cudgels on double his size in flesh and blood. And he's keen as any hare for the slightest sound or stir."

"Humph!" said the maltster, "flibbertigibbets, all should be abed and snoring by nine o' the clock. So good-night, child, and pleasant dreams." And with another kiss, Rumbold dismissed his daughter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SLIDING PANEL.

THE Warder's Room was an excellent example of the famous rule that no stronghold is stronger than its weakest part. Its three outer walls, the one namely terminating the wing, the blind one giving upon the pleasaunce, and the one overlooking the moat, seemed stout enough to defy the teeth of Old Time himself; but the partition wall dividing it from Ruth's chamber beyond, was by comparison a mere piece of pie-crust, though pie-crust of perhaps rather a tough sort, inasmuch as its panellings were composed of oak of no mean thickness.

Here and there, however, whether simply from age, or whether the water-rats infesting the moat below were answerable for any share in the mischief, it was certain the wood showed signs of decay; and one day when Ruth was dusting and polishing the richly carved panels, as it was her pride to do, one large square of them fairly gave way, and fell inwards behind the skirting board.

Groping with both hands to recover it, Ruth found to her astonishment, that, instead of coming,

as she expected, into contact with the corresponding panelling of the room beyond, they strayed off into space, and on closer examination of the framework of the fallen panel, she found that it was grooved. Surely it looked vastly as if she had come upon one of the sliding panels old Adam Lockit declared the house was full of! Very like it indeed, Ruth thought as she kindled a light with her tinder-box, and stepping with it into the pitch-dark cavity, looked round.

Barely high enough for her to stand upright in, it evidently extended on each side of the opening, to the stone and brickwork supports of the arched communicating door, of which as we have already seen Richard Rumbold secured the key into his own keeping. Thus the opening formed a dark passage of nearly a couple of feet wide, and six or seven feet long.

While she was occupied in these investigations a sudden hustling, shuffling sound in the room beyond, ordinarily as still as the very vaults of Stanstead Church, nearly startled her out of her senses. The next instant, however, her own merry laugh at her own terrors broke the echoes, for what was the disturbance but the scratching of the rats, whom her tour of discovery had sent stampeding willy nilly, like bad Bishop Hatto's long-tailed visitors:

> "From the right and the left, from behind and before,
> From within and without, from above and below."

Up by the chimney, down by the open windows plump into the moat.

"Now," smiled Ruth to herself, in the dead silence that ensued, "now I have a secret! and never a creature shall be told of it. Not even Maudlin, nor Lawrence—Lawrence indeed! certainly not! A rare fine place to hide in when next Lettice Larkspur and Dorothy Dingle come to spend the day. Why, if they'd search till midnight, they'd not find me. I should be shut in safe—," here a sneeze, caused by the cloud of dust her movements had raised, interrupted her, "safe as the 'mistleto bough' bride. Almost, that is to say," she went on, brushing away the cobwebs festooning her skirts, as she stepped back over the skirting-board, and kneeling down to replace the panel, she discovered that by the merest touch of her finger she could work it backwards and forwards in its grooves. Not so hard to open as the old oak chest was, certainly; though in every probability it had been so once upon a time, before the dry-rot had shrivelled the wood in its sockets, and the fragments of iron bolts, some strewing the floor, some still hanging, had rusted and given way. A pasteboard sort of protection now the place would have been, though it was no doubt safe enough in those war times of the Roses, when it was built.

And carefully indeed Ruth had kept her secret, though there were times when it grew to be rather a burden to her. When, for instance, she lay in her bed and thought what dismal straits those poor people must have been driven to, before they should have sought such a refuge.

The very existence of the place is, however, forgotten now in this other mystery that haunts her sleeping and waking.

She does not find it at all true, as she sits uncoiling her hair, and absently brushing out its brown waves, that sharing her load of care makes it lighter, as people are so fond of telling you that it does. The weight, on the contrary, seems to have grown heavier, especially within these last hours; and oblivious of everything beyond her troubled reflections, she is only recalled to a sense of realities by Maudlin Sweetapple's voice querulously clamouring for the lamp to be extinguished. "Beshrew the thing!" piped she; "how many more times am I to shut my eyes, and open 'em again, to see all these ghosts about the place?"

"Ghosts?" queried Ruth, escaping to Maudlin's door, and peeping gingerly in.

"Ay, marry, ghosts; black-sheeted ghosts all over the walls," said Maudlin, pointing to the restless shadows cast by the quivering flame of Ruth's lamp. "Look at 'em bobbin' about, and a draught to cut a body's head off! Have you got a pane open in there, child?"

Doubtless that explained the inconvenience; for Ruth had opened the pane in order to catch the faintest sound that might disturb the silence of the night.

"Then shut it," went on Maudlin, as Ruth owned to the fact, "shut it, if you don't want your poor old nurse to catch her death o' rheumatics. A mighty fine sort of a night to be havin'

casements open, this! What's gone, I wonder, of all yesterday's sunshine? 'Tis as cold as Candlemas. Well they may say:—

"'Cast ne'er a clout
Till May be out.'

If—hark! what's that, child?"

"I heard nothing," answered Ruth, listening with all her ears, "nothing but the rain," she added, as a smart sleety shower rattled against the glass.

"So 'tis—at last. There wasn't a joint of all my poor old bones that didn't tell me that was comin'. But 'twasn't that I heard. 'Twas—hush! There 'tis again! The clank o' the drawbridge chains! or I'll eat my head off."

"Don't make rash vows, you silly old dear!" rejoined Ruth, with an uneasy little laugh. "Wasn't the drawbridge let up at sunset, as it always is? What fancies you do take into your head, Maudlin!"

"Oh, ay; 'tis as full of 'em, I daresay, as an egg's full o' meat," grumbled on the old lady. "'Tis only the young ones that are the wise ones nowadays. Good lack! good lack! and how they do like too sittin' up disturbin' the rest o' them that's no mind for moonin' and star-gazin'."

"There's neither moon nor star to be seen," said Ruth, glancing towards the outside obscurity. "'Tis a pitch-dark night."

"And ten, as I live, by the tower clock! For shame on thee, Ruth," continued the old woman,

as the strokes fell; "put out thy light this instant, and grope to bed as thou canst; or I'll warrant we shall never be hearin' the last o't from the master to-morrow. His one eye's sharper than a dozen folk's two, and if it did catch sight of a gleam—What do you say?"

"I did not speak."

"I fancied I heard you mumblin' somethin'. For the merciful powers' sake put out the light, I say."

"Good-night, Maudlin," said Ruth, obeying the injunction at last, but not without reluctance.

A smothered sound, which might have been a reciprocal good-night, but still more resembled a snore, witnessed that the darkness had speedily worked its slumberous effects on Maudlin. Poor Ruth, however, deprived of her lamp's companionship, and too wakeful for bed, groped her way back to her old seat, and sat, every nerve sharpened, to catch the faintest echo.

Save the driving rain, however, and the sweeping of the wind in low sullen gusts round the walls, and its jerking of the tall vane on the tower-top, till the thing complained direfully, not a sound was to be heard. A likely night, truly, for folks to choose to be abroad, especially thereabouts, where there was scarce so much as a tree to shelter you. Anyhow it was plain these expected visitors of her father's had not been so eager to be getting themselves dripping to the skin; and the maltster had no doubt given them up ever so long ago, and gone to bed.

With cramped limbs, but a lightened heart, Ruth rose and once more approached to close the pane, which she had again unfastened, after first noiselessly closing Maudlin's door. Well, bed was after all no such uncomfortable place, she thought, as the dank air blew in on her face, "when the clock must be close on—hark! yes: ding-dang! ding-dang! ding-dang! Absolutely but wanting one hour—ding-dang—to midnight! Such an unearthly ding—terrible—dang."—

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE WARDER'S ROOM.

ING! Like some guilt-stricken creature Ruth stood with her hands upon the half-closed pane.

Lingeringly and drearily the sound died in a low angry growl of wind, that came sweeping up muffled and sullen as some vexed human voice. Hark! hark! surely that is a human voice!—voices! And that? No steady drip-drip of the rain from the mullions of the casement, but footsteps stealthily passing along the arched way below, and beginning to ascend the stair winding to the Warder's Room!

Impossible! Sure she must be growing more fanciful than old Maudlin's self? No, no; 'tis but the tiresome rats again, holding their witches' sabbath? What else can it be?

The sudden flash of a torch full across her window illumines the pitchy blackness below; and then, as if hurled by some violent and angry hand, the torch falls into the water and is extinguished.

Not quickly enough, however, to conceal from Ruth the gigantic outlines of the drawbridge,

gliding higher and closer, till it is lost in the shadow of the wall, and at the same time the clank of its chains, more felt than heard, with their dull familiar vibrating, ceases.

Who can have been tampering with them? Surely not Adam Lockit. Rather than be unfaithful to his trust, and let down his bridge after sunset, he would dispute every ounce of it with his life's blood. But what about Barnaby? Barnaby! and even at that moment Ruth cannot forbear a smile at the bare notion of Master Diggles' Dutch courage displaying its mettle within six hours of either side of midnight. Even supposing he could have performed the miracle of stealing a march on Lockit, and getting possession of the gatehouse keys.

No. One alone, beside Adam Lockit, has the means of working those chains—the master of the Rye House himself.

Spell-bound and breathless, Ruth stands listening to the stealthy but heavy tramp tramp of those feet mounting the stone stair which leads from the arched door in the wall of the gateway to the Warder's Room.

Soon the sounds cease; to be quickly broken again by hurried whispers and the low hum of voices. Muffled and indistinctly as they reach her ear, the tones seem familiar to Ruth, and her heart stands still. What—what if Lawrence—?

Hardly has his name escaped her pale parted lips before with swift noiseless tread she has stolen to the wall, and falling on her knees before

the sliding panel, slips it back, and stepping into the darkness beyond, crouches down.

Not an instant too soon, if movements so cautious and catlike as hers could have betrayed her; and that was possible, judging by the distinctness with which she on her part can catch every syllable that is being uttered in the Warder's Room by the party of men gathering, as she can plainly see through a long crack in the wood, about the long table.

"All right, Master Hannibal," says a voice she does not know. "We wait your pleasure."

"Nay," objected another, which Ruth at once recognized for one of those she had heard upon the bridge, "your commands, Master Rumbold."

"By my faith! there you speak by the book, colonel, like the good soldier you are," shiveringly said a voice, whose delicate tones were also not strange to Ruth. "Pleasure's a fish that I for one should be for angling after in other preserves than the slush and bog of the Rye. Hu! hu!" shuddered the speaker. "And not so much as a stick of a blaze on your sepulchre of a hearth here, Master Hannibal! A merry welcome truly to bid your boys! and all of us as wringing wet as any of the rat vermin in your styx of a moat below there. I'm drenched to my skin."

"Had I imagined it to be so thin," dryly returned the deep tones of the maltster, "I would never have invited your lordship to join our company."

"And the place smells as mouldy as a vault,"

fretfully continued the nobleman. "I can tell you, had I known it was such a stretch from my house I'd in any case have spared you my company to-night."

"We could have dispensed with such fine-weather friends," began a gruff surly voice, "if—"

"Hold thy peace," interrupted Rumbold, "and save your wit, Master West, till my Lord of Escrick here can find his own to measure with it."

"Of a truth, I confess my brains seem all washed out," said Howard more good-temperedly, "by that last slush hole I floundered into, when I set off in pursuit of the jack-o'-lanthorn, some idiot among you said was a light in the Rye House."

"My Lord of Escrick makes a rare pother about a sprinkle of rain," said the voice which was strange to Ruth; "if he'd been jolted all the way from Fleet Street, as I have been, atop of the raw bones of a pack-horse like a sack of husks—"

"Hush! by your leave, Master West," for the remembrance of his sufferings warmed the speaker's eloquence. "Not so loud. Some one sleeps in the adjoining chamber."

"Marry! 'twould have been as well then," rejoined West, in sour, but considerably lowered tones, "if you had thought fit to entertain us in some other part of your ramshackle house here, less conveniently adapted for eavesdropping—"

"And for getting off if we should be surprised," said Rumbold quietly. "Have I not explained often enough, that this chamber is in direct communication with the subterranean way to Nether

Hall? You shall judge it for yourself presently, as I promised you."

"And besides," put in Walcot, "we are safe, Master Rumbold said, from being overlooked on this side."

"The place seems Scylla or Charybdis," said Howard laughing, "and a veritable vermin trap to boot—if one may judge by the snuffling in there," and he pointed to the wainscot, "eh, Master Hannibal?"

"The four-legged pests do somewhat overabound here, my lord," answered Rumbold; "but my own friends are safe enough, I pledge you my word. I did but entreat Master West to be a bit careful. His voice is scarce so still and small as caution behoves."

"Liken it rather unto that of a trumpet," piped the shrill tones of Ferguson, "which shall blare to the uttermost walls—"

"All in its good time, Master Ferguson," interrupted Walcot; "meanwhile remember walls have ears."

"And so have listeners," growled West, still sorely put about with himself for his own forgetfulness, "long as asses' ones."

"Nay," said Rumbold, "they'd have to be longer and sharper too, to pierce these walls. More than three feet and a half thick I know them to be."

"And all of pure stone?" inquired a voice.

"No, of oak, Master Sheriff, which is at least as trustworthy"

"It is a strange omen," said Walcot ruminatively.

"A what?" derisively chorused half a dozen voices.

"'Tis not the first time oak has served Charles a good turn in his evil hour."

"What's the man maundering about?" said West.

"I know not," growled Rumsey. "Unless it be of that accursed Boscobel oak-tree. Well, well, I'll warrant root and branch shall be lopped this time close enough, eh, Master Rumbold? and we'll bring its fine acorns into the mud. Come, to business. Are we all here?"

"I do not see my friend of the other night," said Howard looking round. "The young gentleman who so deftly rendered my hand that surgeon's service."

"Lawrence Lee, you mean, my lord?"

"Ay, that was his name. A likely young fellow he seemed. A neighbour of yours, I think you said, Master Hannibal?"

"He should have been here," said the maltster; "but 'tis no matter, we can do without him. He is—"

"To be trusted, let us hope," growled West. "I swear, Master Rumbold," and he glowered towards the wainscot, "your rats are the noisiest I ever heard."

Poor Ruth shivered with terror. She had but stirred to avert the worse crash of a slip she had nearly made in that cramped space.

"The vane atop of this roof, creaking in the wind," said Rumbold carelessly.

"If we should find these Rye House rats of the spy genus, we'll spit them on it," said West.

"And you along with them, Master Rumbold," said a voice which had not yet spoken.

"Your insinuations waste precious time, Sir Thomas Armstrong," said Rumbold, a frown of offended dignity puckering his brows as he turned and, crossing to the great oaken chest standing between the windows, raised its ponderous lid with both hands. "I would not be held a boaster; but those who have known Richard Rumbold longer than you have, will tell you that he is not the man to put his hand to the plough and draw it back. See," he went on, addressing the rest, who greeted his last words with a low murmur of applause, "here lie our tools," and he pointed into the open chest, "all in order; not forgetting the last cargo —muskets, bayonets, blunderbusses, and all."

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

"BLUNDERBUSSES!" shrieked a voice, which seemed to retreat, as it spoke, into the room's remotest corners; "the gracious powers above! Mind, for mercy's sake, be careful. Not loaded?" piteously went on the speaker. "Say they're not loaded, Master Rumbold."

"Not yet, Master Sheriff," grimly smiled Rumbold.

"But whatever can we be wanting of such fearful things?" insisted Goodenough.

"That remains to be seen," laughed West, approaching the chest; and selecting a weapon from its gleaming contents, he placed it in Rumbold's hands. "Here, Master Hannibal, is the one I promised you for your special use. A jewel of a thing. Be careful of it."

"Ay, yes, yes, do," entreated Goodenough; "hear what Master West says about it himself."

"A sacred trust indeed," murmured Rumbold, thoughtfully handling the weapon, "and wielding a mighty power, for good or for ill. Come, Parson

Ferguson," he went on, suddenly changing his mood, and turning to the tall, lean, sable-clad individual standing on his right. "What say you? Will you consecrate it?"

"Of a surety it has my blessing," answered Ferguson, displaying his ugly yellow fangs of teeth in a broad grin.

"Well, well, to business then," continued the maltster, carefully restoring the blunderbuss to its place and closing the chest. "Come, have we our parts by heart? You, and you," he went on, singling out three of the company, "and you."

"Oy, oy! sartain sure enough we be o' ourn," said the foremost of the trio, slouching to the front, and elbowing his two comrades forward along with him, so that Ruth could plainly discern their features, and recognized them for the foreman of the malting-yard, one of his subordinates, and a man who worked in the corn-chambers. "Roight enough we be, an't us?" he went on, appealing to the sheepish, hangdog looking couple beside him. "'Tes for we to be trampin' out Stanstead way, an' hidin' us among the hedges and ditches till us catches soight o' the king's coach an six; an' then 'tes for we to be turnin' tail in a twinklin', and run as quick—as quick as—"

"Twice as quick anyhow, friend, as the twenty-four legs of his majesty's Flanders mares," said Howard with a slight yawn.

"Back agin to the Rye House here," continued the spokesman, "an' be tellin' the rest o' yer which coach the king's a-ridin' in—"

"And how many—"

"I'm a comin' to that, an't I? an' how many's a follerin' after 'em in coaches too, an' how many guards a 'orseback—"

"Six at the outside," said Rumbold. "'Tis never more. You, colonel," he went on, addressing Walcot, "undertake to attack them."

"As a soldier, I claim that privilege," answered Walcot.

"If report speaks truth, you're not wanting in bravery," said Rumsey, measuring the stately and graceful figure of Walcot with rather jealous eyes; "but six is a biggish handful for one man to tackle; and if," he went on with a sneer, "your gift of second sight should chance to be making twelve of it—"

"Or if in fact there should happen to be so many," quietly interrupted Walcot, "I trust I may not be found wanting—nor tripping neither."

"As to the beasts," said Rumbold quickly, "we shall have little trouble with them. They'll all be spent and weak as water with the long stage."

"They change at Hoddesdon, do they not?" said Howard.

"If they were foreordained to reach there, they would, my lord," rebukefully replied Rumbold. "And now, what about the disguises?" he continued, addressing his foreman.

The son of the soil scratched his carroty poll, and gazed round with lack-lustre eyes. "The what, maaster?" he said at last.

"The labourers' clothes, man, that you promised

to furnish my Lord Howard here with, and the other gentlemen."

"Oy, oy," and a gleam of intelligence broke over the stolid face. "Now you speak English, Maaster Rumbold. Yes, they be all roight enough; leastways they will be. But 'tes jest a bit of a job loike, doant'e see, Master Rumbold. Stands to reason as 'tes, doant it? Gettin' tagether o' poor folks' togs. The quality's got any quantity o' coats an' britches, silk and satin', an' velvet an' double broadcloth into the bargain; but 'taint every day an' ollis, as yer poor man's gotten his one decent smock. But, never ya fret, my lord. Me an' these here," and he jerked his thumb at his two comrades, "a doin' our main best; an' the blame woan't be to our door, if us doant make such clod poles and scares o' ya, an' these here other dandy gen'lemen, as the very crows sha'ant be able to make up their minds whether to fly away from ya for freight, or peck yer eyes out as ya walk along."

"That is satisfactory," said Rumbold. "The next question," he went on, letting his gaze rest on the elegant proportions of Howard, who had thrown himself in a careless lounging attitude into a tall-backed Cordovan leather chair, "the next question is"—

"So it be," interrupted the foreman of the malt-yard; "so it be, maaster, an' 'twas no more than us was a sayin' of as we coomed along here. Warn't us?" and again he appealed to his mates, who nodded stolidly. "'Tes sartin as our cat's got

a tail, there's not one o' the lot o' ya as looks to be trusted loike."

"Fellow!" fiercely demanded Howard, springing to his feet, "what do you mean?"

"The wagon is a main heavy one," continued the man, unheeding the angry frowns of Howard and the rest, "and'll need a power of elbergrease afore't can be turned over; an' we can't be lendin' you fine gen'lemen that, along with our britches an' smocks. You'd best have the cart overturned by we first," and he pointed to his companions, "afore we start away, doant ya know?"

"Certainly not," said Howard haughtily; "I hope we're not such idiots that we can't do carter's work."

"Carter's work! Why! 'tes carter's work to be keepin' of his wheels from gettin' bottom uppermost. Noa, noa, ye'll never be but gimcrack soarts o' carters, take ya at ya best, an' if ye're for doing of the upset yerselves, there should be six o' ye to the work, my lord, or ye'll make a mess o't, be shure."

"Then," said Howard, "it remains for you to supply us with the six needful pairs of breeches, and hobnailed shoes."

"I'll swear for the britches, an' the shoes ye'll have to make stretch as far as they'll go."

"And you," said Rumbold, turning to West and a group near.

"Ay, we engage for the coachman, the postilion, and the horses," nodded West. "We're quite content, Master Hannibal, to leave you to bring down

the Blackbird and the Chaffinch. You're a fine shot, and ought to do it at one priming, with such tools as you've got for it; tho' 'tis true you'll be two to one, and your birds have got some blood in them."

"Ay, but their claws will be blunt," laughed Rumsey. "'Tis scarce probable, I mean, that they'll carry so much as a sword between them. They never do."

"Still assistance should be at hand, and close too," said Sir Thomas Armstrong.

"Among the whole twoscore names written here," said Rumbold, drawing a large roll of parchment from his pocket, and unrolling it, he glanced over its contents, "there is not a steadier hand, nor a stouter heart, than my young neighbour's here of Nether Hall, Lawrence Lee."

"Lawrence Lee!" echoed Walcot, casting an involuntary glance behind him ere the words had well left his lips. Could he be such a prey to strange fancies, or had he in very deed and truth heard a low gasping breath break from the wall? "You're certain he's to be trusted?"

"I flatter myself," replied the maltster, a faint smile curling his lips, "that Master Lawrence Lee would think twice before he refused to comply with the slightest wish of Richard Rumbold."

"Wasn't his father a Royalist?" said Howard.

"And what if he were, my lord?" rejoined Rumbold. "Lee is a lad of spirit, and exercises his right of private judgment."

"Exactly," said Howard, with a dubious shrug.

"He takes leave to call his soul his own. And that, of course, is all in this business. But how about his heart? You have a daughter, have you not, Master Hannibal?"

"And what if I have, my lord?" said the maltster coldly.

"Oh, no offence," carelessly returned Howard; "but she is a comely lass, they say. Quite a rustic beauty."

"Beauty is skindeep, my lord. She is a good child."

"And minds her doll," broke out Rumsey in a hoarse laugh.

"Nay," said Rumbold in displeased tones, "my Ruth's doll-days are about over. But she minds her wheel; and meddles not in such matters as we are discussing—or should be discussing," he added, as the clock over their heads struck midnight. "Moments are precious."

"And for my part," said Howard, this time with an unmistakable yawn, "I think we are misusing them odiously. There is a fortnight still before the king comes back from Newmarket; and between this and then all sorts of things may occur to change his plans."

"What is to be, will be," said Rumbold solemnly.

"Oh! that I grant you," said Lord Howard with a portentous yawn, glancing at the same time towards one of the window embrasures, whence issued a prolonged deep sound, not unlike the smothered growl of a wild beast, but which

in fact emanated from the nose of Sheriff Good-enough, who lay back, lost in the enjoyment of a snatched forty winks. "That I grant you, and so seemingly does our good sheriff here; for he has yielded to the inevitable, and is snoring like a trooper. Shake him up, colonel," he added to Walcot, who stood close by, leaning against the panes, and gazing thoughtfully out into the night. "If you're not asleep yourself, that is."

"Very far from it, my lord," answered Walcot, rousing up and approaching the table; "I was thinking that all being said and done, it is time to consider the measures for our safety. We don't want to be run down inside these four walls like a pack of weasels."

"By no means," said West; "we're going to burrow underground before we part to-night, for a good mile and a half through Master Hannibal's subterranean way. Aren't we captain? So as to make sure we don't blunder our heads into any wrong holes, when the time comes."

"An excellent notion," said Howard with animation. "And a better night than this abominable Noah's deluge of a one could not be. 'Twill spare us wading like a flock of geese to—. By the way, where did you say it brings us out, captain?"

"Into a large vault that lies under the right-hand tower of the ruined gatehouse of Nether Hall."

"And near the river?"

"Within a hundred yards of it."

"And then 'Sauve qui peut,' I suppose."

Rumbold inclined his head gravely.

"And Nether Hall," continued Howard, "belongs to our young friend Farmer Lee. I perceive now. You're a clever man, Captain Hannibal. You did well indeed to win the fellow to our cause, since his premises appear to be indispensable to our precious lives. But how is it we do not see him here to bid us welcome to his dungeons?"

"We may find him below. But if not, 'tis no matter; and if he should have stolen a leaf from Master Goodenough's book there, and gone to bed, I have the duplicate keys. He has made them over to me;" and the maltster, kindling his extinguished torch, signed to his companions to do the same. "'Tis pretty well pitch dark," he added warningly, "even in broad daylight, every step of the way. Ho there, Sheriff! Wake up! And a murrain on you for a sleepy-head. Give him a pinch, colonel," he added to Rumsey, who chanced to be seated nearest the sleeper.

"I couldn't be so barbarous," replied Rumsey, with a peculiar sneering smile. "Hark!" he went on, as a thunderous snort was all the comment on Rumbold's adjuration. "Let him be."

"Oy, oy. Let 'm bide, cap'n," said the foreman. "They narrer cellars an't for the loikes of a hogs-head like he. He'd be stickin' fast in the middle o' them like a dodnum in a duck's weasand. Let 'un sleep his sleep out."

"Nonsense, man!" said Walcot. "We can't leave him here all alone."

"He won't be alone if I'm with him, I suppose,"

said Rumsey with a snarl; "and I shall remain here. You won't catch me coming down to break my shins in your pitch-dark vaults at this time of night; as if I wasn't lamed enough already with that confounded stumble I made on Monday night. Time enough when I've got to run for it."

"Do as you please," said Rumbold; "I shall be back in a couple of hours or so."

"Ay, ay. Don't hurry. 'Twill be right enough if you leave us here."

"Like doves in a cage. Ha! ha! Or a couple of fighting cocks," said Howard, with a laugh that was echoed a little dubiously by all present, for it was no secret among them that Rumsey and Goodenough did not love each other. "Well, well; slumber, my darling! eh colonel? ha, ha, ha! and peace be with you."

And Howard, lighting his torch as he spoke, followed the rest, who, preceded by Rumbold, were beginning to file down the winding stair through the door by which they had entered.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITTLE DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

WHEN the shuffling of the footsteps of the conspirators had died away far down below, not a sound was to be heard, save the rain, now fallen to a gentle patter, and ever and anon the wind spending itself in low fitful moans round the old mansion. From time to time, however, this monotony was varied by the obbligato which Sheriff Goodenough's nose continued to trumpet forth.

One more than ordinarily prolonged and loud snort afforded Ruth an opportunity of changing her cramped position, and at the same time of obtaining a clearer view of the scene before her.

Almost immediately facing her, at the corner of the table, sat Rumsey, staring with such a fixed steady gaze straight before him, through the lamp's thin flickering flame, that she trembled and sank crouching to the floor. Could he have caught sight of her?

Never a fear of that. For even if he had chanced to notice the long straggling crack in the wainscot, and that tiny hole caused by the dis-

placement of a little knot in the wood, you had but to look at his moody face a second time, to be sure that his thoughts were blinding his outward senses to all around him; save when from time to time he turned his head on his sleeping companion with an ugly look of mingled mistrust and contempt.

"Clod! idiot!" he growled at last through his clenched teeth, at the same time drawing a short poignard from a sheath in his buff leathern belt, and throwing it on the table with such a clatter that it woke the sheriff, who sat up with a start of terror.

"Ha; thieves!" he shouted. "Murder! Call the watch!"

"Come, come, sheriff; what's the matter?" laughed Rumsey. "Are you dreaming still? don't you know where you are? Hey! look about you, man."

Goodenough obeyed mechanically; and his dazed eyes, as fate would have it, fell first upon the naked dagger, glittering in the lamplight—"What's that? what's that?" he shrieked again, startled into all his senses at the sight of the thing. "Take it away! For mercy's sake, take it away," he entreated piteously. "It—it's just what I've been dreaming about! Put it up, Master Rumsey; dear Master Rumsey, put it away in its proper place."

"When I am quite sure where that is, I will," coolly answered Rumsey. "In the meantime you and I, sheriff, will just have a little bit of

gossip together. There couldn't be a nicer opportunity for it, while we've got the place all snug to ourselves; 'under four eyes,' as they used to call it when I served in Italy."

"But where are they all?" said Goodenough, staring round into the darkness visible, with eyes now thoroughly wide-awake. "And how the plague came I to fall asleep?"

"I suppose only Sheriff Goodenough can solve that problem," answered Rumsey with a shrug.

"But where are they all?" persisted Goodenough.

"Ah!" impatiently said Rumsey, "down below."

"Down below!" gasped Goodenough. "Oughtn't we to be there along with them, colonel? They'd no business to go leaving us all alone;" and the sheriff shivered—"Eh, ought they now? Let's be going too, shall we?" and Goodenough rose to his feet, and began stumbling in his haste to reach the door, over the disorder of chairs and footstools. "I'd rather, I would indeed."

"Too late," said Rumsey. "They're ever so far by now. "Serves you right, sheriff. Who ever heard of being caught napping when there's work of this sort on hand? Come, now—steady there—come. It's of no earthly use your rattling the bolts about like that. The captain's locked us in."

"No, no, he hasn't," said Goodenough frantically, wrenching at the ponderous door till he dragged it half open. "See!"

"The mischief seize you!" savagely returned

Rumsey, snatching off Goodenough's hands, and banging to the door again with a kick. "Not that one. The door, I mean, down at the stairfoot. 'Tis locked, I tell you. Double, triple locked; and you can't get out if you tore your arms off trying."

"But never mind," he went on, as Goodenough fell back despairingly against the wall, "don't look so down in the mouth, man; ain't I here?" and with a low chuckle of amusement at the poor man's discomfiture, he flung himself into a chair, and thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, sat watching through his half-closed eyelids every movement of his companion, who retreated slowly to a chair standing farthermost from Rumsey, and sat down on its edge, looking the very picture of wretchedness and despondency. "'Tis too bad," he said shiveringly, "I wish I hadn't come. I wish I'd never—" Then he stopped short.

"Well?" sharply interrogated Rumsey, fixing the unfortunate man's wandering glances with the steady, piercing, snakelike glitter of his own. "Say on, sheriff, out with it; you wish you'd never—joined this conspir—this society; is that it?"

"I said nothing of the sort, Master Rumsey," faltered Goodenough. "But I—I—I do say—h'm. No matter;" and as his eyes followed Rumsey's, which were fixed on the dagger upon the table, he relapsed into silence.

"On the contrary," said Rumsey in calm hard tones, "'tis very great matter. Our noble associa-

tion brooks no sticklers, nor cowards neither. What were you going to say?"

"That I hope there's not going to be any—any blood-spilling," said Goodenough in a steadier voice.

"Whose blood?" laughed Rumsey. "Charles's, do you mean?"

"Ah, heaven forbid!" fervently ejaculated Goodenough, "and forgive us the bare thought. Of the guards, I meant, or of any with him."

"That they must take their risk of, pretty dears," sneered Rumsey, "so long only as we secure our Blackbird, and our Chaffinch."

"Ay, ay," sighed Goodenough. "Well, 'tmust be chanced, I suppose, as you say, colonel; and perhaps if it comes to't, the sacrifice of a man's life will be forgiven by Providence, so only as we can succeed in bringing his majesty to our way of thinking, and make our Protestant religion safe from these popish scoundrels; and bind him to appoint a real true Church of England king to come after him."

"Instead of the Chaffinch."

"The Duke of York must certainly be set aside, if it be true indeed that he is a Papist at heart."

"If!" cried Rumsey in tones that might have been crook-backed Richard's own.

"But I never dreamed," continued Goodenough, "that 'twould come to blood-spilling, I protest, even of so much as a poor horse's."

"Bluer blood than a wretched Flanders mare's,

or a handful of red coats', will be staining yonder road before this moon's out, I take it," muttered Rumsey. "You're a fool, Master Goodenough," he added in a louder key, and turning contemptuously on Goodenough; "a cowardly fool."

"No," said Goodenough, and he rose to his feet, a sudden light of indignation in his eyes; "but you are a traitor, Richard Rumsey! and 'tis not now for the first time I read your murderous thoughts." A low laugh was all Rumsey's comment. "Master Rumbold," hurried on Goodenough, "and Colonel Walcot—"

"Bah! Walcot!" interrupted Rumsey, snapping his fingers.

"And my Lord of Escrick and the rest know well enough how I have bidden them beware of you."

"Absolutely!" said Rumsey, elevating his brows, and the corners of his mouth quivering about his teeth like some hungry hyena's. "We're as mighty fine as the pot was, when it talked a homily to the kettle. Do you imagine that Charles, once safe in their clutches, our good captain, or my Lord of Escrick, or any man-jack of our forty boys, would let him off alive?"

Goodenough was silent for a moment. "I doubt they would not one of them stain their hands with cold blood," he said then. "And for a certainty I can speak to Walcot—"

"Psha! speak no more of him, the white-livered loon."

"I can speak to Walcot," stoutly persisted

Goodenough, "for many times I have heard him say that a fair front-to-front tussle with the guards was what his soul itched for. But for attacking the king he would not do it; for that it was a base thing to kill a naked man."

"Naked!" sneeringly echoed Rumsey as he rose from his chair and sauntered towards the table, on whose edge he seated himself, and began carelessly toying with the handle of the poignard he had thrown there. "Let his purple and fine linen shield him."

"They would stand him in less stead against a bullet or a blade-thrust, than even my good Norwich drugget here would shield me, if any man bore me a grudge," answered Goodenough with a faint smile. "But 'tis no matter; why should it be spoken of? 'Tis quite certain that none of us are for killing the king, nor anybody else."

Rumsey's lips twitched with the old baleful smile. "There I think you are out, Master Sheriff," he said, as he took the poignard into his hand, and began examining its hilt with a half absent attention. "The puling scruples of a mere handful out of all our forty boys would not go for much;" and he fixed his eyes in a covert glare on Goodenough, who stood thoughtfully gazing into the lamp; "and these must be got rid of, for a 'house divided against itself cannot stand.'"

"'Tis the assassins who must be got rid of," sturdily retorted Goodenough. "For they foully blot our cause."

"Ha!" cried Rumsey starting up, with the

poignard clutched fast in his hand. "Do you forget who—what I am?"

"Nay. But I think you do," answered Good-enough calmly. "You should be a soldier, but it looks much as if you would have me take you for a scoundrel, and a craven-hearted assassin!"

The last word was lost in a sudden sharp shriek of agony; and swaying round, Good-enough clutched convulsively at the poignard which lay plunged to the hilt in his breast, and fell heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XVII.

"DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES."

" O, Master Sheriff," muttered Rumsey, as he stood coolly watching the thin stream of blood trickling slowly from the prostrate body of his victim, "that is one of you ticked off, at all events. It was such a pity you should be calling names for nothing, wasn't it? and wasps like you are mightily troublesome, not to say dangerous; for who's to guess where you mightn't go buzzing our plans? Not dead yet, aren't you?" he went on scowlingly, as a low groan broke from Goodenough's lips. "Why, you yelled out loud enough for a dozen men. I swear I could almost have fancied 'twas a woman's screech, 'twas so shrill;" and he looked round as he spoke. "But then one might fancy anything in this charnel hole of a place;" and again he cast covert glances at the shadows thrown upon the wainscotting by the flicker of the expiring lamp; and crossing to one of the windows, he looked out through the murky darkness, towards a light gleaming steadily in the far distance. "Cold as charity it is too. I'd give a gold piece

to be out of this, and drying before the kitchen fire over at the Thatched House at Hoddesdon yonder, with a cup of mulled sack and a tender cut.—The mischief seize you!" he growled on, as a deep groan from the wounded man arrested his speculations, and turning sharply on him he saw Goodenough feebly move his right hand towards his breast. "Not still yet? Hang it! Richard Rumsey never pinned a jerkin so clumsily before. Want it pulled out, do you?" he continued, with a brutal laugh, as he came close up beside his victim, and stooping over him, plucked the poignard from his breast. "Have your way, then. But don't be saying it's my fault, if your last gasp comes with it." Then with savage indifference he saw the ebbing thread of life-blood swell into a stream let loose by the removal of the weapon, and the limbs relax, while the face grows gray and fixed. "So, I thought as much. Well, go your ways friend, to your journey's end, and keep yourself ready when you get there, to welcome the Blackbird and the Chaffinch when they knock. And now I think I'll be going my road;" and Rumsey glanced meditatively towards the window. "Another time will serve to explain to Captain Hannibal how you got yourself into this coil. Stay," and he slowly lifted the blood-stained poignard still dangling in his fingers. "A mighty excellent notion!"

Kneeling down by the wounded man's side, he wrenched open the clenched fingers of his right hand, and thrust the hilt of the dagger between

them. "Yes," he muttered; "that will tell its own tale. And now for the Thatched House."

Returning to the window, and craning out his neck, Rumsey spent several minutes, first in consideration of the projecting corbels and cornices, and the stout webwork of ivy covering the walls; then drawing his head back again, he fell to scowling contemplation of his lamed foot. Once on terra firma, nothing, he knew, was easier than to find the postern; and if by ill luck it should be locked, the trees bordering the walls on their inner side would assist him to scale them, and so away across the Rye by the bridges.

Only the first step was the hard one; but the guilty man knew there was no choice for him but to grapple with it; and after one or two clumsy failures, he succeeded in at last obtaining a firm footing on the window ledge.

Scarcely had he accomplished this feat, than a flash of light broke across his eyes, with such startling suddenness that it caused him to sway forward, and he would have dropped headlong into the moat, had he not stretched out both hands, clinging for dear life to the stout old ivy trails; and by a wrench and a twist that for some hours afterward he did not forget, held on by the jutting stone-work of the window, staring helplessly into the room at the figure of a man, who stood lantern in hand, in the arch of the door facing him. "Hullo!" he cried.

"The same to you, colonel," laughingly returned the voice of Lawrence Lee. "What in the

name of Fortune are you about there? Marry! 'Tis an odd time of night to be practising gymnastics!"

"Lend me a hand for mercy's sake!" gasped Rumsey, "or I shall fall and break my neck."

"And it would be such a pity that, eh, colonel?" laughed Lee, as he ran forward. "Have with you then."

"Great heaven!" he cried, stumbling in his haste head foremost across the body of Good-enough; "what have we here? Sheriff Good-enough!" he continued in horrified amazement, as he turned his lantern light on the pale still face, and perceived the pool of blood it lay weltering in. "Dead? Murdered?"

Rumsey shrugged his shoulders with an air of cool indifference.

"Man!" shouted Lee, turning on Rumsey. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Pooh! nonsense!" replied Rumsey, as well as his almost spent breath permitted him. "Dead! Well, like enough; but murdered—Here, hi! lend a hand, can't you?"

Lawrence complied; but the hand he placed at Rumsey's disposal was no very gentle one, and he hauled him to the floor like a sack of bones. "Speak, man!" he cried.

"Well, give me breathing time," answered Rumsey, shaking himself; and then, glancing askance at the dark mass upon the floor, he growled sulkily, "What is it? What do you want to know? Murdered? Well, killing's no murder, I

take it, when a man is driven to it in self-defence."

"Self-defence!"

"Ay. There's no telling where I mightn't be now, if this quarrelsome fellow here, had got the best of me. Don't you see the dagger there in his hand?"

"Where are you hurt?" asked Lawrence, looking from the dagger to Rumsey.

"I?—I?—Oh!" stammered Rumsey confusedly; "well, well, 'tis nothing to speak of. A scratch; hardly a mere scratch."

"Who's dagger is this?" demanded Lee, stooping down, and closely inspecting the weapon in Goodenough's grasp.

"Whose should it be?" rejoined Rumsey, letting his eyes fall shiftily beneath the penetrating glance of Lee, as it fell on him.

"Faith! well, only I never knew him to carry so much as a bare bodkin about him," said Lawrence.

"Then that shows how little you do know him," retorted Rumsey. "A more bloodthirsty, cantankerous fellow than he is, isn't to be found among the lot of us. Why, he's for lopping everybody who doesn't say 'snap' to his 'snip.'"

"'Tis very strange," said Lee thoughtfully.

"A nice thing," grumbled on Rumsey, letting his eyes rest on Lee's left hand, which hung straight down beside him. A nice thing to attack a man in this fashion, as if he was a viper in a rut. And it's preciously fortunate I'm always prepared for any surprise. You'd find

it a hard matter to catch Richard Rumsey on the hip;" and he smiled a smile of infinite self-complacency. "What's that dangling in your fingers there?"

"Only the key of the tower door," absently replied Lee. "But," he went on, again keenly glancing over Rumsey's figure: "it takes two to a fair fight—and a pair of weapons. Where is yours?"

"Hadn't I my choice of twoscore at least out of the toys there?" said Rumsey after an instant's silence, and pointing to the oaken chest. "If you doubt it look for yourself. A real embarrassment of riches, eh?" he went on, watching Lee's face, as he lifted the lid of the chest and stood gazing at its gleaming contents. "Enough to do for a score of lives if one had 'em. But the best of us has but one in this bad world," he continued, piously turning up his eyes; "and Providence has spared me, as you see, from the sword of the ungodly. I'd have given my best firelock, though, it had not happened;" and for once Rumsey spoke pure and simple truth. "The fellow had his faults, but I had a great respect for him."

"And is that what sent you clearing off in such a hurry?" asked Lawrence, turning contemptuously from Rumsey, and kneeling down beside Goodenough's motionless body he set his lantern on the floor, and the key beside it, and raised the wounded man's head; "and leaving him in this state?"

"Well, you see—" but here a violent fit of coughing interfered with Colonel Rumsey's powers

of articulation. "Hang that open window!" he said, when speech at last returned; "'tis enough to give a man his death," he went on, as he closed the pane with such violence that the draught from it extinguished the dying flame of the lamp. It was—h'm—h'm—it was awkward, don't you see, being found here, with—with no one to tell the tale but myself, as it were; for dead men tell none," he added with a low chuckle.

"He's not dead," said Lawrence, placing his hand on Goodenough's heart.

"Bah! dead as a door-nail. I'm mightily sorry for it, to be sure; but the fellow brought it on himself. What could I do? Necessity knows no law."

And Rumsey, stooping down over Lee as if to scrutinize the countenance lying pillowed on the young man's arm, contrived to let his hand drop well over the key upon the floor. Then clutching the ring of the lantern, he paused and repeated his observation. "Take my word for it. He's dead as a door-nail. Good-night, Master Lee. I'll leave you to explain matters, if it's all the same to you."

Lee looked up. Absorbed in his efforts to staunch the flow of blood from Goodenough's wound, he had hardly heard Rumsey's last words. As, however, he raised his head the door fell softly to, and he found himself in total darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"GOD SAVE THE KING!"

" OME back!" he shouted.

He might more effectually have summoned back the wind, as it swept past with a low snarling hiss, as if in mockery of his indignation; and before he had time to repeat the words, the last echo of Rumsey's footsteps had died on the lowermost stair, and Lawrence Lee heard the scraping of the key in the lock of the tower door.

"Coward!" he cried aloud, "will you have me fetch you back?" and gently replacing the wounded man upon the ground, he rose to his feet, and with a couple of strides reached the door; but scarcely had he done, so than a deep groan from Goodenough brought him to a halt, and he turned, dizzy with perplexity. To allow this fellow to get clear off was not to be thought of; and yet, to give chase to him and leave the unfortunate Goodenough?—"

"Lawrence! Lawrence!" imploringly cried a voice which seemed to him to proceed from the

wainscot to his right. He started and looked towards the spot.

"Lawrence!"

"Ruth!" cried the young man in amazement, "is that you?"

"Yes, yes. For the pitying heaven's sake stay! See here, I am getting a light."

He waited, stock-still, listening to the scratching sound of the tinder-box, perfectly audible through the panel's rotten wood; and then, as the thin yellow streak of light broke through the crack, he flew to the spot. "Out of the way, Ruth!" he cried; and as he spoke he raised his clenched fist and struck the panel such a sledge-hammer blow as sent it splintering in all directions, revealing the figure of Ruth by the light of the candle she held in her hand, enframed by the woodwork, like some cunningly painted picture.

The illusion, was however, instantly dispelled, as she stepped eager and breathless to the floor; and hastening to Goodenough, and falling on her knees beside him, she carefully opened his coat. Then tearing her linen kerchief from her neck, she bound it gently but firmly over the wound in such a manner as to staunch it and stay the rushing blood, which, had it continued but a few moments more, must have drained his life away.

Then having bathed the unfortunate man's face with some water from a small pitcher which she motioned to Lawrence to bring her from the table, she gave a deep and long pent-up sigh, as she perceived a faint flicker of returning anima-

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RUTH AND LAWRENCE SUCCOUR SHERIFF GOODENOUGH

tion overspread the ashen features. "So," she murmured.

"Ruth, my poor Ruth," said Lawrence. "This is a cruel sight for you." She shuddered, and gazed momentarily from Goodenough's face to his.

"I'd have given all that's mine, child," he went on, "to have spared you the sight of it."

"Ay," murmured Ruth. "'Twas terrible, very very terrible."

"Still, my dear," went on Lee philosophically, "don't take it to heart too much. One of the two must always get the worst of it in a fair stand-up fight. Eh, mustn't one?

"But 'twas no such thing," flashed Ruth. "The coward lied, Lawrence—lied to you. I saw it all," she went on shudderingly, "from the hole in the panel there. And he—that man Rumsey—struck him unawares. Think of it, Lawrence; an unarmed man!"

"Nay, hardly that," said Lee, extricating the poignard from Goodenough's fingers, and examining it by the light of Ruth's lamp. "For he must have struck Rumsey. See, there is blood upon this. It is stained to the very hilt."

"And did not Rumsey himself tell you that he had been barely so much as scratched?" she said. "Lawrence, that witnesses against him. These very words, that he intended to screen his guilt, would tell the truth against him, even if there were no tongue to tell what eye has seen."

"No, Ruth," said Lee, slowly shaking his head, and gazing distressfully into the fiery brilliancy

of her eyes and on her pale face, flushed on either cheek with two spots of burning red. "You did not see it. You must have been dreaming, child. It was some hideous nightmare. Such a double-dyed treacherous villain as that, no man could be. No, Ruth, no. Say he did not do it," he added imploringly.

But she shook her head silently.

"It is not possible," he went on. "He—Ruth—that man and I have touched hands, in—well, in token of good fellowship."

"And God forgive you then, Lawrence," she replied. "As indeed I think he will. Because you do not know all. I am sure you do not know— "But hush!" she went on, interrupting herself; "hush, we must not be found here. My father will be back—"

"Ay, but not yet awhile. I left them all deep in—in their conversation, in the octagon vault."

"And did not their conversation interest you, Lawrence?" demanded she, gazing keenly into his face.

"Why, to confess the truth, not so very much," he replied, evading her look. "And your father—"

"Ay," she said eagerly, as he hesitated.

"He said I should mayhap do better to be coming on, and joining company with Colonel Rumsey and Master Goodenough here. I doubt," he continued ruminatively, "he suspected they might be falling to loggerheads; for I never knew them meet, but what they did always set to sparring like a pair of Kilkenny cats."

"That may be so," answered Ruth; "but this I am positive of, that those dreadful men wanted to be rid of you, for they would not have you know of the shameful deeds they are plotting. They make but a tool and a cat's-paw of you, Lawrence. Ay, but they do," she insisted, in no way daunted by the wave of offended dignity Lee's hand made. "For they know well enough that your heart is too honourable to stoop to baseness like theirs."

"Tut! tut!—"

"They think you but a fool, and right proud I am they do; for they are knaves and murderers. Their whole talk to-night was of the best way of killing the king."

"Killing the king?!!"

"And the Duke of York. When they should come back next week from Newmarket."

"But—but your father?!" gasped Lee." He—"

"Oh do not—do not speak of him," implored she, clasping her hands in agony. "My good, dear father, Lawrence. How can we save him?" she went on in calmer tones.

"Save your father?" said Lawrence, gazing in helpless dejection into the misery of her face.

"The king; the king; for to save him, is to save my father from—from—sure, Lawrence, he must be mad; he must be saved from himself. And I—you must do it. Do you hear? Do you understand?"

Understanding, Lawrence felt, might come in time. For the present, only his ears fully mastered

what Ruth had said, and, helplessly shrugging his shoulders, he continued to stand gazing vacantly at the prostrate form of Rumsey's victim.

"Yes, yes," she said, her eyes following his, "you are quite right. He must not be found here."

"But," began Lawrence, "how can we hide him?" and he glanced towards the door communicating with hers. She shook her head. "'Tis locked; my father has the key. He took it this morning. There is but one way;" and she pointed to the broken panel—"this."

Half an hour later, had any of the conspirators returned to the Warder's Room, they would have found no trace of what had occurred there since their departure.

First, as gently as he was able, Lawrence, with Ruth's assistance, carried the wounded man to the secret passage, and laid him on the bed which she hastily prepared for him from the pillows and coverings of her own bed. That done, he stepped back into the Warder's Room, and having, with the aid of the pitcher of water, succeeded in effacing the worst of the ugly tell-tale stain upon the floor, he set the chairs overturned in the fray upon their legs again, and then busied himself in collecting the scattered pieces and splinters of the broken panel. Finally, after no small labour, not lessened by having to reach across the space occupied by the body of the unconscious Good-enough, he pieced the panel together, so that it looked, as he said, keenly surveying it when he

had done, "as if catapults could have made no impression on it."

"I doubt," said Ruth with a faint smile, "one must not, however, breathe on it too roughly lest it fall to pieces."

"Hark! what's that?" whispered Lawrence in alarm, as a low curious burring, purring sound in the room beyond made itself audible.

Placing her finger warningly on her lip, Ruth crossed the floor, and, lifting a piece of tapestry half-covering one of the walls, she disappeared; returning, however, almost immediately with a bottle of cordial in her hand, and a look of relief on her face.

"Maudlin is sleeping as fast as a dormouse," she said, pouring a few drops of the bottle's contents into a cup, and moistening the wounded man's lips.

"But if she should waken?" said Lawrence.

"We will take difficulties only as they come," answered Ruth. "'Tis scarce likely to happen before daybreak. And long before then, Lawrence, you must be upon the road."

"Upon the road! To where?" demanded Lawrence aghast.

"Newmarket."

"The king," she went on, as he continued to stare at her in speechless astonishment, "must be warned of this danger that threatens him. And 'tis you must warn him."

"I!" flashed the young man. "Ruth, what do you take me for? I play traitor? I be a turncoat?"

"It is because you are not one," she answered calmly, "that you will do this. It is because you are loyal and true that you will not stand by and see this crime done."

"Betray my oath?"

"You never swore to taking the life of a fellow-creature; least of all your king's."

He was silent. She had indeed spoken the truth; yet how could he bring himself to acknowledge to her, what he shrank from admitting to his own heart, the weakness of that easy nature of his, which had brought him to this terrible pass? His one thought had been to "keep neighbourly," as he called it, with difficult Master Rumbold. To give the maltster offence, was never to see Ruth again, and that was an unendurable thought. And so, hardly conscious whither he was drifting, he suddenly found himself on the edge of this abyss of crime, from which the soft, sweet, but resolute voice at his side now warned him back ere it was too late. "Choose," she said.

"I cannot," he answered, turning and gazing sadly down on the pale agonized face which had never before seemed so dear to him. "There is no choice for me, Ruth, but to go."

"And Heaven reward you!" she said, a ray of gladness breaking into her tearful eyes as she laid her hand on his arm.

"Farewell then, Ruth!" he said with an almost imperceptible shrug; "and if we should never meet again—." He paused. "Farewell then, Ruth."

And turning away his face, as if he dared not again meet the sight of hers, he took her little hand in his and wrung it fast. Then springing to the window ledge, he flung the pane wide open, and planting one foot firmly on the fretted stonework outside, was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIX.

"STARS AND GARTERS."

HE inmates of the King's Arms had been in bed and asleep full four hours, and profound silence reigned throughout its precincts, when, a few moments after the gatehouse clock had chimed one, a loud rattling on the panes of Mistress Sheppard's bedchamber window roused her from uneasy dreams.

"Cuther! what a night!" ejaculated she, sitting up and listening to the sound as it fell again with increased violence. "There's hail for you! Big as pebble stones, be sure."

A third shower made it clear beyond all question that pebble-stones they were; and rising in haste, she opened a pane of the lattice and looked out.

"Is that you, Mistress Sheppard?" said a muffled voice immediately beneath, as the billowy outlines of her nightcap broke dazzling white amid the surrounding darkness upon the vision of the speaker.

"And is that you, Master Lee?" sharply replied the mistress of the hostelry, as her nocturnal

visitor, turning the light of the dark lantern he carried full upon the casement, revealed at the same time his own form and features. "What do you want?" she went on in dudgeon, "coming here at this time o' night, bringin' honest folks' hearts into their mouths, and disturbin' their rest?"

"Yes, yes," hastily assented Lee; "'tis very late, I grant you—"

"Early, I suppose you mean," fumed Mistress Sheppard, clutching the pane, to snap it to again. "And let me tell you—"

"Oh, yes! whatever you please, if—"

"Please! There's little o' pleasin' in bein' waked up at this hour."

"No, no. Quite true. But listen, just listen."

"I'll do no such a thing. What do you want, Master Lee?"

"A horse."

"I'll see Sheppard has his horsewhip in nice trim for you next you come this way," irately retorted she; "an' be you ten times master o' Nether Hall."

"Nay; for that he need be at no trouble," laughed Lee, hitting a swish in the air with a short riding-whip he carried in his other hand. "I've got my own with me, as luck had it. And if not, 'twould have mattered little enough, for 'tis rarely Stars and Garters needs whip nor spur either."

"Stars and Garters!" gasped Mistress Sheppard.

"Ay, 'tis her I'll take, with your good leave," calmly returned Lawrence.

Now Stars and Garters was the name distinguishing the pride of the King's Arms, and of her mistress's heart, a beautiful black mare, marked with a white star on her left breast, and a curious ring of white hair below the left knee, whose match for docility and fleetness of foot was not to be met with in all the country side; and the audacity of Lee's proposition took Mistress Sheppard's breath away. "Stars and Garters!" ironically ejaculated she, when at last she recovered it. "What next, cuther?"

"A brace of pistols," began Lee.

"Ah! Thieves!" she shrieked. "Murder!—"

"Hold your silly tongue, woman," peremptorily interrupted Lee. "What do you take me for? Don't you know Lawrence Lee yet?"

"I'm none so sure that I do," replied she, recovering all her wonted presence of mind. "And I have liked not your ways of late, young man, and so I tell you."

"I doubt they have scarce pleased me better than they have yourself," said Lee, with a frank and yet humbled look in his upturned face, which somehow went straight to the good woman's heart.

"If I know toadstools from mushrooms, he means honestly," she went on to herself, showing, however, no signs of capitulating, and sternly pursing her lips. "They would ill become your father's son," she said aloud, "and make sore places in his heart, as a certain prodigal son's we wot of, did."

"And he resolved, did he not, to try and mend

his ways. So come, Mistress Sheppard, quick with the stable-door key; there's a good soul; and Stars and Garters for England and the King."

"The king?!" and curl papers all forgotten, Mistress Sheppard's head craned eagerly down from the casement.

"Ay, he's in danger," nodded Lee, catching up, as he spoke, a rusty crowbar lying in the grass; "and there's not a moment to be lost, I tell you. Shall I break open the stable door and help myself?"

"No, no, one instant," she replied, glancing at the slumbering Sheppard, "one instant and I'll be down."

She was better than her word; and in a few seconds, attired in strange garments to protect her from the chilly night-air, she was standing beside Lee, assisting him to prepare Stars and Garters for her journey, before the good mare had well got her wits together. As, however, she felt Mistress Sheppard's own plump hands tightening the saddle-girths round her sleek body, she roused up, and uttered a loud neigh of pleasure.

"Pretty dear!" murmured Mistress Sheppard. "Hark how eager she is to be upon the road, bless her! 'Tis more, I'll warrant, than some Christians'd care about; bein wakened up out o' their beauty sleep. Sheppard, now, he'd been as growly as a bear with a sore head. Now, then, up with you, Master Lee. Here's your pistols," she added, thrusting a pair into the holsters. "You can tell me the tale when you come back.

There's some o't won't be so mighty fresh to me, I'm thinkin'. So off with you, and good luck be your servant."

With a hurried wave of the hand Lee clattered out of the stable, and clearing the low garden fence by a bound, horse and rider started "thorough bush, thorough brier," across the fields, till they attained the high-road, winding on by the low open country to the fenny Cambridgeshire wastes, old England's least beautiful part, so lovers of nature say.

For another class of folks, however, it possessed in those days immense attraction; inasmuch as it formed the highway from London to the town of Newmarket, which Charles the Second had made the most important and fashionable horse-racing place in the kingdom. He was accustomed to visit it some five or six times in the year; establishing his quarters at an old mansion situated in the middle of the High Street, which he had purchased from its owner, the Earl of Ormond, and had caused to be altered and enlarged, to accommodate himself and his retinue. Thither, as may be imagined, like wasps after honey, swarmed all sorts and conditions of men, and of women too; from my lord and my lady in their velvet gowns, to the ragged and jagged beggar, and worse than these, the footpads, and "gentlemen of the road," as it was the fashion to call these thieves on horseback, who infested the great highways all over the country.

It need hardly be said that this one and par-

ticular half hundred miles of road, stretching between London and Newmarket, was very carefully attended to by these gentry; and Lee, as he cantered on, did not forget to keep one hand near the holsters.

Nothing, however, occurred to vary the monotony of his way, beyond encountering now and again some solitary pedestrian, probably as honest and sober as himself, and here and there some few yards from the road, a group of wayfarers bound for Newmarket, encamped upon the stunted turf round the smouldering embers of their hastily kindled fire. Towards three o'clock he reached the large wayside hostelry at Chesterford called the Blue Bear, where travellers from London always stopped to change horses.

Here, before the big wooden horse-trough in front of the main door, Lee slackened his rein; and while Stars and Garters gratefully drank in the cool clear water, he called for a jack of ale for his own refreshment. The drawer was, however, so slow in getting his drowsy wits together, that when at last he did hand up the jack, he found that he was holding it in empty space, and his customer had disappeared.

"He wor in a mighty hurry," grumbled the man, as he stood listening for a few moments to the fast dying sounds of the horse's feet, and then stooped down to grope by the light of the lantern swinging to the sign-post, after the coin which Lee had flung down in discharge of the reckoning for the refreshment he had not stayed

to enjoy. "Well, he must be a woundly wittol be sure, or his business is such a rare pressing one, that he can spare to pass by this;" and he gazed affectionately into the ale's clear amber deeps, "as if 'twere no more'n a cup o' fleet milk. Didn't the king's own self say, but t'other day, last time he comed by, and drinked his nippet o't, that naught o' the stuff in his Whitehall cellars don't hold a rushlight to't? Maaster'd be monsus put about, ef he comed to know of its being scorned so. Naa, Naa," he went on, putting the jack to his lips. "I shudn't dare let him knaw as my fine young gen'leman didn't drink so much as his neckum out o't;" and the charitable creature, to conceal the traveller's shortcoming, took a draught, so long and deep, that it absorbed two-thirds of the liquor, "there goes Sinkum—and," he said, drawing a long breath of satisfaction, and again contemplating the interior of the jug, "an' seein' as him as doan't knaa how to finish a job when he's begun't, but a poor sort o' creetur, why," and tipping up the jack, he emptied the remainder of its contents down his throat, "there goes Swankum after 'em.'" And having thus vindicated the honour of the house, he turned in to renew his interrupted slumbers.

The rain had long ceased; the air smelt warm and fragrant, as, soon after daybreak, Lawrence Lee came in sight of the roof-tops of Newmarket showing sharp and dark against the clear gray sky, just rose-tinted with the hues of the rising sun, whose rays were gilding the smooth turfy

down, till it gleamed like richest velvet. Very soft and pleasant it must have felt to the weary feet of Stars and Garters; though indeed as she alighted from the flinty road on to the elastic grass of the course, she carried herself so bravely, that none of the critical eyes she was now encountering could have guessed she had been an hour out of her stall. Who knows but that she was conscious that her laurels were at stake; for already, though it was barely six o'clock, the course was dotted with knots of gentlemen and trainers, and a host of hangers-on and loungers engaged in keen discussion of the pros and cons of their ventures, or watching the jockeys as they breathed their magnificent barbs and racers in a morning gallop.

"Who be he, I wunner?" enviously growled a mounted jockey as Lee dashed past. "Happen you caught sight of his colours, my lord?"

"Black," laughingly replied the gentleman thus addressed, a handsome man richly attired in a becoming morning suit. "By my faith, black as the very mischief's self, for aught I could see besides. Black as Old Nick and his nag. Eh, Master Alworth, was it not so?"

"Nay," replied the somewhat elderly, grizzled, beperiwigged gentleman to whom the other had appealed, as he leaned with one hand on his silver-knobbed ebony stick, and shaded his eyes with the other, to gaze after the strange horse and his rider. "Black to a certainty. But in my poor judgment the animal was such a Pegasus of grace

and vigour, and his rider's countenance looked such a goodly one, that if ever our patron George of England wore a suit of sables."

"And bestrode a black charger?" gaily interrupted the other.

"Even so," bowed the elder man, with a twinkle in his kindly brown eyes; "why, I should have guessed him to be our champion saint in the flesh."

"Hastening to deliver his country from the evil-doers," said the nobleman.

"'Twould be a miracle indeed if he could do that," soberly answered Mr. Alworth, "or he a Quixote of Quixotes to dream of it."

"More like he is come to match his Rosinante's paces with our Fleetfoot's here," rattled on the other, as he toyed with the nose of the beautiful racer against whose shoulder he was leaning. "By the way," he went on, addressing the jockey in charge of it, "which day is settled for the match with Woodcock?"

"Monday se'nnight, my lord," answered the man.

"Does the king stay so long?" asked Alworth, looking up in some surprise.

"Long!" groaningly echoed the younger gentleman. "'Tis all too short for us poor Cambridgeshire squires, let me tell you, Master Alworth. When the court's back again in London, we may as soon be the cabbages in our own kitchen-gardens, for any pleasure there is in life."

"Pleasure!" groaningly echoed Master Alworth,

as he turned and faced slowly about towards the town. "Pleasure! Pleasure! 'Tis the watchword always, and a melancholy one it has grown to be in my ears, since it no longer pairs off with duty; as though one should surfeit always on honey, and eat no bread, and poor England is sickening sorely of it. Pray heaven she be not finding any plague of quack doctors to try their remedies on her;" and with a sigh Mr. Alworth pursued his way.

CHAPTER XX.

"A FRIEND IN NEED."

AWRENCE LEE had meanwhile reached the town. Hardly, however, was he well into the High Street before he was forced to rein up, impeded at every step by the dense throng, crowding as far ahead as eye could reach. Epping Fair was a small thing by comparison with this motley medley of bawling wagoners, shrill-tongued farmers' wives haggling over their butter and eggs, screaming children, chattering apprentices banging about the shutters of their booths, barking sheep-dogs, chasing their terrified charges back into the ranks, braying donkies, clattering of pack-horses stumbling beneath their burdens over the cobble-stones, and all to the tune of the several church bells and clocks clanging out six. The unaccustomed senses of Lawrence Lee lost their balance for a moment, and he closed his eyes to assist their recovery, but opened them again in a twinkling at the sound of a voice demanding in not too honeyed accents where he was "shoving to?"

"It's you that's shoving," retorted Lee, looking

down wrathfully at the speaker, whose uplifted elbow was raised insultingly near Stars and Garters' nose; and lifting his whip, but letting it fall again as he perceived what for the first moment he imagined to be an old man. A second glance, however, showed him that the shambling gait, pasty-coloured cheeks, puckered features, and lacklustre eyes helped to the composition of an individual of somewhere about his own number of years.

"I'll teach you and your jade to trample down gentlemen in the street," growled on this young old personage.

"Come, come!" laughed Lee good-humouredly, "I didn't mean to do anything of the sort. You're not hurt, are you?"

"No thanks to you if I'm not," sourly returned the other.

"Oh, come now. Did you get out of bed left leg foremost?" again laughed Lee.

"Right or left," ingenuously yawned the other, whom a game of basset had detained from between the blankets far into the small hours; "if they've been in bed at all, it's as much as they have."

Lawrence Lee's case was in degree a similar one; and his own weary sensations made him feel some sort of indulgence for this individual's sulky humour. "Oh, that accounts for it," he said to himself.

"Accounts for what?" fired back the other, catching the *sotto voce* comment.

"For your being so polite—and—and—"

"Well," fumed the other, "people who have any manners never stop gawking in the middle of their remarks. It an't good breeding."

"Isn't it now? Well, for your looking so fresh and spruce then, I took you for a scarecrow."

"And I take you for a clodpole," glared back his new acquaintance with an affected laugh, "to whom 'twill be a real charity to give twopence a week to learn manners."

"That begins at home; keep it for your own necessities, my friend. You see I know how to be generous. But if you're really so amiably disposed towards me—"

"Go about your business."

"That I shall be able to do, when I have gone miles enough to find some one with a tongue in his head, civil enough to direct me to the king's palace."

The other opened his dull eyes in a preternaturally wide-awake manner, and bestowed a scrutinizing stare on Lawrence. "What may you want there?"

"Folks with an ounce of manners never meet question with question. It isn't good breeding—not in the part I come from."

"And where—"

"Where do I come from? That's a question whose answer will improve by keeping. So out of the way, friend, if you can't direct me."

"Can't!" hysterically giggled the other. "Ho! Come, I like that. Ho, ho! Ha, ha! That's rich. Don't you know who I am, friend?"

"Haven't a notion," said Lawrence, looking away from him up and down the street, and anxiously surveying its snug but unpalatial-looking houses.

"How do you conceive, I wonder, how I come by these, my good fellow?" he went on, pointing downwards.

"Padded a bit, aren't they?" said Lawrence, driven to utter the passing comparison he had already unconsciously instituted in his own mind, between the remarkable symmetry and plumpness of the pair of silken-clad calves, and the meagre upper proportions of their proprietor.

"Psha! Bah! These, I mean;" and then Lawrence perceiving that not the legs, but the pair of fine blue cloth breeches covering them, were the indicated objects, said, honestly enough, he doubted not, nay, he was sure they were, by many a long mile, the very finest small-clothes he had ever seen, and must have cost a pretty penny.

"Out of His Majesty's own purse," replied the other, waxing sweet-tempered as any cat rubbed under the chin, and elevating his insignificant nose, as he buttoned on the coat he had carried inside-out over his arm, and which Lawrence now perceived to be of the same cerulean hue and glittering embroideries as the nether garments. "Now," he went on, falling well back on to the heels of his rosetted shoes, and strutting forward a few paces. "Now do you know who I am?"

"I haven't the ghost of a notion, I tell you," said Lawrence, watching the exhibition with

absent impatient eyes, into which, however, a gleam of hopeful intelligence began to dawn; "but I think I know what you are. One of the king's lackey fellows."

"Sirrah!"

"For sure!" and Lawrence slapped his knee, and his face grew full of animation. "How came I not to recognize the cut of you sooner, when I've seen any number of you hanging as thick as thieves scores of times—about the King's Arms, swilling down its cider—"

"To which King's Arms do you refer, my good fellow?" lisped the lackey. "There's hundreds of 'em scattered over the country."

"Opposite Master Rumbold's."

"Never heard of the fellow," said the lackey, airily stroking his little chin. "Hang me now if I have. Shouldn't be able to tell him from Adam, renounce me now if I should. Rumbold? Rumbold?"

"Of the Rye House."

"Never so much as heard of the place," said the lackey, and slowly shaking his head with the action and beatifically vacuous smile of a Chinese image.

"That shows how little you know the king, then, for he knows it well enough," contemptuously returned Lawrence, "as well as he does one of his palaces. 'Twas a palace too itself, once upon a time; and 'tis big enough for the squinniest eyes to see."

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" screeched the other.

"Hear the clodhopper—all his geese are swans. I apprehend you'll be for telling me next that your Rye House is as fine an edifice as this;" and he languidly extended his hand in the direction of the house beneath whose walls they stood.

"This!" echoed Lawrence, laughing merrily. "This dog-hole of a place hold a candle to our old Rye House! Come," and briskly twitching Stars and Garters by the rein, he was about to push on, "how much farther to the king's palace?"

"Under this archway and across the yard," said a voice immediately behind him.

Lawrence's face fell blankly. If he had not quite anticipated walls of gold and columns of ivory, he had conceived of something statelier than this mean, patched-up-looking house. "I thank you, sir," he contrived, however, to say at last, turning to the speaker and lifting his cap deferentially, as he perceived him to be an elderly man, somewhat tall and still fairly robust, in an iron-gray periwig, and with a genial glance in his keen gray eyes, overshadowed by brows still thick and dark. The Mr. Alworth, in fact, whose acquaintance we have already made upon the heath.

"And if," continued Lawrence, "you will add to your obligation by telling me how I may come to speak with the king—"

"Ho!" chuckled the lackey; "renounce me if ever I heard the like of that!"

"I am no courtier," answered Mr. Alworth, suppressing the lackey's outbreak by a look; "but I am acquainted with many that are," he

went on with a flicker of a smile; "and I often hear them say that His Majesty is not difficult of access, provided you have, of course, some letter of commendation."

"Not the ghost of one," said Lee with another blank stare.

"Ha! ha!" grinned the lackey in vast enjoyment of Lawrence's discomfiture. "A pretty fellow! What do you say to that, Mr. Alworth?"

"Silence, Mr. Flippet," said Alworth sternly. "You should have provided yourself, my friend," he went on, turning again to Lee. "You have doubtless influential neighbours—"

"Oh, yes!" said Lawrence, scratching his curls.

"Standing well at court?" continued Mr. Alworth.

"Well, I don't know so much about that. H'm, h'm—the fact is," stammered on Lawrence, "I—you see, I came off in—in just a bit of a hurry."

"And the more haste the less speed. You will know that, when those brown locks of yours have got a silver streak or two among them. Well, I don't know what's to be done," he added cogitatively.

"Go back where he came from, like a bad penny," interjected the hugely delighted Flippet, but in a key too low to catch the ear of Alworth, of whom he stood in wholesome awe. That personage having, as he believed, and not without

good cause, power to mar or to advance his fortunes by reason of his intimate acquaintance with many whose time was passed about the presence of the king. And Mr. Flippet was fond of his place, in spite of his complaints concerning its arduous and fatiguing duties. These consisted in the daily washing and combing of a couple of little dogs, respectively named Azor and Médor, two prime favourites among the posse of snubby-nosed, silky-coated, fringy-pawed, lilliputian spaniels which his majesty loved to have about him. As to the daily airing necessary for their health, the king himself was their nurse; and the toilets of the little creatures completed, Mr. Flippet was lord of his time, of which the portion not devoted to slumber, eating and drinking, and the basset-table, he spent in dawdling about.

"I fear there is nothing for it," said Mr. Alworth after a brief speculative silence, "but for you to return home, and obtain such a letter of introduction. 'Tis a case, I doubt, where, as the old saying has it, 'the longest way round is the shortest way there.'"

"Go back!" cried Lee in dismay. "Thirty miles if 'tis a yard. Sir! sir! and 'tis a matter of life and death!"

"That's what they all say when they want to be fleecing the king or you; an't it, Master Alworth?" sneered the lackey.

The remark was, however, lost on Alworth, who was absorbed in the study of Lawrence's countenance; but turning his eyes on Flippet at

last, he said: "Mr. Flippet, you are a person of considerable influence with the gentlemen of the bed-chamber—according to your own account."

"Oh, Mr. Alworth!" blushingly rejoined Flippet, "you're too kind to say so; renounce me if you're not."

"Denounce you, you mean sir!" sternly said Alworth. "And that, let me tell you, is what I had more than half a mind for, when I heard those two wretched little dogs yelping in the stable yonder to the tune of a switch, as I passed some two hours since."

"Oh, Mr. Alworth!" yelped Flippet in his turn, and falling on his knees, regardless of the puddles; "you'll never tell of me, Mr. Alworth. 'Twould be a hanging matter for me, if it came to his majesty's ears. Oh! Mr. Alworth, the lazy, pampered little beasts put me out of patience, and I—I—"

"If all the pampered animals were treated by their deservings, some would come worse off than Azor and Médor. Get up, you foolish fellow. You cowardly pretence of a man, chastising two poor helpless little dogs. Don't let me hear of it again."

"You shall not, Mr. Alworth," whined Flippet, inwardly resolved that next time he had occasion to "correct" his charges, it should be with closed windows and stuffed keyholes. "You shall not! Oh! don't tell of me this once," he went on in an agony of entreaty, "and I'll—I'll stand on my head to do you a service."

"You'll serve me better," smiled Alworth, "by keeping it where it is, and giving your brains a chance of devising some means of bringing this young man before the king, without an instant's delay."

"I—I—" gasped Flippet. "Oh! yes, to be sure; only, you see—"

"Yes or no," said Alworth inflexibly.

"Anything to oblige you—" began the unfortunate lackey.

"Very good," nodded Alworth. "'Tis but a small enough favour. But for my own part, I have never so much as seen his majesty face to face; and should have to be beholden to some of my friends for introduction to him myself, though we are near enough neighbours, and have had some business together. But my name, sir," he went on, turning again to Lee, "is but plain Richard Alworth. To be heard of across the way yonder, over against the parish church, at the sign of the 'Silver Leopard.'"

"And my name," said Lawrence, "is Lee—Lawrence Lee."

"Of the Nether Hall Farm, by Hoddesdon?" cried Alworth, a sudden light dispelling all the little clouds of mystification in the keen eyes transfixing Lawrence.

"The same," nodded Lee, as he dismounted from his horse; "at your service."

"The son of my good old friend and comrade!" and now tears glistened up into the eyes. "The loyalest heart that ever beat," he went on, seizing

the hand of Lawrence. "We fought side by side on Worcester Field; and he was struck down. Heaven does so often take the best early back to itself. Well, well, he died worthily—as a man may be proud to die—for King and Country. You look your father's son," he went on, scanning the young man keenly; "every inch of you. But I must not detain you now; and Mr. Flippet here is, I can see, dying to acquit himself of his little obligation. So fare you well, Master Lee, till you favour me with your company at supper to-night. Nay, come, come; but I'll take no denial. Don't forget the 'Silver Leopard.' Anybody will direct you. I'm well known. Your servant, my lord," he went on, acknowledging the salutation of a gaily-dressed gallant, who thereupon linked his arm familiarly into that of Alworth, and led him away engaged in earnest conversation.

"Ay, there they go," muttered Flippet; "hand-in-glove, of course, like he is with 'em all. That's what it is to have your pockets well lined," continued Flippet, thrusting his hands into his own highly-decorated, but, thanks to the past night's little amusements, absolutely empty ones.

"A wealthy man?" said Lawrence.

"That's not the word for it," enviously replied Flippet. "No courtier? No. I'll warrant Richard Alworth, the goldsmith, wouldn't change his mouse-coloured broadcloth for all their fine feathers. But he's a good sort. I don't say anything against him. Leastways he would be a

good sort if he wasn't such a confounded, pig-headed, obstinate old—"

"Come, Mr. Flippet, when you're ready," interrupted Lee.

CHAPTER XXI.

"A FRIEND INDEED."

PASSING beneath the archway, where Lawrence Lee delivered Stars and Garters into the charge of a groom, who advanced to receive her in obedience to a lofty gesture from Mr. Flippet, the two crossed the courtyard, which was handsomely paved with octagon-shaped black and white marble flags, and decorated with orange-trees set in huge painted china tubs, and statuary emblematic of the amusement which the king came hither to pursue.

Not by the main door, whose low double flight of winding steps was protected by a rail of cast iron, wrought into grotesque shapes of centaurs and winged horses, but by a little side postern, half hidden in one of the irregular angles of the building, Lee and his companion gained a dark vestibule; ascending thence by a narrow break-neck flight of stone stairs to a corridor above. Pursuing its tortuous turns, it brought them in sight of a fair-sized gallery, whose gaily gilded balustrades and painted walls catching the pale

yellow rays of the morning sun, presented a garish, confusing picture to the somewhat wearied senses of Lee. It would, indeed, have been a hard matter to find a resting-place for the eyes amidst the ever moving throng of richly dressed figures, conspicuous among which were numbers who were clad like his companion in silver-laced blue livery. These deftly threaded their way to and fro, bearing salvers of burnished silver loaded with cut-glass silver-gilt flagons, and brilliantly painted coffee and chocolate pots of oriental china. Pressing on after Flippet, or to speak with absolute correctness, dragging Flippet onward, Lee soon found himself in the very thick of the chattering, giggling, simpering crowd of fine ladies and gentlemen who were bidding their good-morrows to each other, and exchanging sweet compliments.

"A nice trim he's in," dismally grumbled Flippet to himself, as he marked the disgustful stares and supercilious smiles of this butterfly bevy, at the stranger's mud-bespattered attire, and the terror and alarm with which they snatched their skirts and ruffles from possibility of contact with it. "A sweet trim truly for an audience! It's all mighty fine for Master Alworth to say, 'Flippet do that,' and 'Flippet do this,' as if I was any fetching and carrying poodle dog; but—" and the gaze of silent despair he was bestowing on the rich blood-red Genoa velvet curtains which now stayed their progress, was more eloquent than words.

No one knew better than himself that the brazen gates of an ogre's castle could more easily be broken through, and a couple of dragons sooner mollified, than that pair of suave-looking six-foot-high personages, habited in blue and silver, and wielding slender white wands in their delicate hands; for did not they guard the sacred way conducting straight to the private apartments of the king?

"And what may be your business this morning, Mr. Flippet?" demanded one of these personages, "and who may be your friend?" he added, glaring at Lawrence Lee.

"I—I—" stammered the lackey. "He's no friend of mine. Renounce me if he is, and—and—it's no business of mine, I assure you, Mr. Usher, none whatever."

"Then don't meddle with it," laughed Mr. Usher, as he looked far over Mr. Flippet's head into the gallery's middle distance; "but mind your manners, and stand out of the way. And you too young gentleman," he went on addressing Lee. "Don't you see who's a coming?"

He emphasized these words with such a sudden lunge of his staff of office at the objects nearest to him, which happened to be the unfortunate Flippet's legs, that the lackey shifted aside in blind terror, and fell stumbling against Lee. Unprepared for the shock, Lawrence in his turn must, but for a dexterous twist which regulated his balance, have lain sprawling his length at the very feet of a lady, advancing towards the

curtained way, accompanied by a group of some half dozen more ladies, who remained standing a pace or two in the rear of her, as she came to a forced halt.

Fortunately these awkward manœuvres brought about no worse mishap than the brushing to the floor of a little book which the foremost lady had held lightly in her hand.

Crimsoning with shame to the roots of his dark curls, Lawrence stooped down, and picking up the book was about to present it to the lady, when he felt the skirts of his coat pulled from behind with such violence, that a second and still more deplorable misadventure must inevitably have occurred, had not the lady averted it with a peremptory, but still gracious gesture of her small ivory-white hand.

"Nay, gentlemen, you are unmannerly," she said, in tones of gentle remonstrance, and whose accents sounded strangely in the ears of the Hertfordshire farmer. "What is the meaning of this?" she went on, her dark eyes kindling with indignation and surprise, as they traversed the circle of ladies and gallants whom the disturbance had drawn to the spot. "What is the meaning of it?" reiterated she, receiving the book from Lee's hands with a gracious inclination of her head. The onlookers simpered vacuously at each other.

"Your majesty—" began the Usher.

The Queen! In spite of the strange heart-beating sensation which then seized Lawrence,

his curiosity, or more correctly interest, was still sufficiently his master, to permit of his bearing away in his memory the enduring picture of Catharine of Braganza, the not too happy wife of the merry careless Charles the Second.

How was it that this middle-aged, olive-complexioned Portuguese lady, whose mouth would have been prettier had not her teeth projected somewhat too far, and whose chief beauty lay in her magnificent dark eyes, though indeed her small figure was slender and graceful enough—brought comely English Ruth Rumbold to his mind? Only so it did. Could it be some association which similarity of dress brings? True enough, Ruth's holiday gown and petticoat were but of tiffany, and her cobweb cambric neckerchief only hem-stitched neat as needle could do it; whereas the queen's petticoat was of finest silver gray taffety, bordered like its tawny brown brocade overskirt, with pinkish silken embroidery, and the broad fine linen collar covering her shoulders, and reaching close round her slender neck, was edged with magnificent Spanish lace. For the rest, Lawrence with his masculine ignorance of women's fallals could not have enlightened you at all; but had he presumed to ask the surrounding court ladies, they would have uttered little scornful shrieks, screwed up their red lips—rosy as salve could make them—tossed back their glossy straying ringlets, and told him that the queen was a starched old frump, who stuck to the odiously dowdy fashions of thirty years ago and more, when

melancholy Charles the First was king. Yet perhaps after all, it was not the modest style of her dress, but something in the womanly sweet composure of her speech and bearing, that crowns all women, old and young, plain and beautiful, with a grace of its own; that reminded Lawrence Lee of his little love, won his allegiance to the king's wife, and sealed his determination to save the king, or die in the attempt; let this butterfly swarm sneer and simper as they pleased, and half draw their rapiers, as they were beginning to do, muttering: "Insolence," and "Upstart," and the rest of it; while the ladies giggled hysterically, and cried, "Malapert," and the usher continued to stammer on in dire confusion:—"You see—that is, your Majesty will compre—that is, of course apprehend—that is to say—ahem—understand that here is some plot—"

"Ay, ay. Quite so," eagerly interrupted Lawrence, and casting grateful looks at the usher. "That is it—a plot. A vile, infamous plot—"

"Sirrah!" frowned the usher. "A plot between this fellow Flippet here," he went on, again addressing the queen. "Your Majesty knows him well,"—and he pointed his wand at the now trembling nurse of Azor and Médor, "and this stranger here, to thrust themselves into the presence of his Majesty."

"Wherefore?" demanded the queen; and the inquiry was caught up and echoed on every side.

"Heaven knows," groaned the usher, turning up his eyes.

"And not heaven only," cried the excited young man. "For 'tis a hellish conspiracy to murder the king—Madam—your Majesty"—he hurriedly continued, in a voice tremulous with agitation; and utterly unconscious of the sneers and uplifted hands of the by-standers, he threw himself at the queen's feet. "'Tis a matter of life and death to the king. I must see him. You who are all potent with him—"

"Listen to that now!" giggled the ladies.

"Entreat—implore him to grant me an audience," and he caught the queen's skirt.

"Come, come. This troublesome fellow is too insufferable," cried a young gentleman springing forward, and seizing Lee roughly by the shoulder.

"Hands off, my Lord of Grafton," sternly cried the queen, who saw, or thought she saw in all this pretended zeal, the veiled intention she only too frequently experienced, of setting her will at naught. The young nobleman slunk back, looking crestfallen and louring. "Go forward, sir," continued Catherine, waving back the rest, and motioning Lee to precede her along the corridor.

The curtain fell behind them, and Lee found himself alone with the queen and her ladies.

CHAPTER XXII.

Our sovereign lord the king,
Whose word no man relies on;
He never said a foolish thing,
And never did a wise one.

THE king's private apartments in his ramshackle, patched-together, wandering old hunting-lodge, presented a vastly different scene from the like sacred precincts by courtesy misnamed "private" at Whitehall. There up to his bed-rails all was buzz and bustle; here in Newmarket his love of ease, and his good-will and pleasure, were so far consulted and respected that the swarm of courtly hangers-on was kept at bay by those velvet hangings; and Lee heard not a sound in the corridor they had entered but the rustling of the ladies' gowns and the echo of his own footfall.

Pausing before a door about midway along the right-hand wall of the corridor, and which bore on its heavy ebony panels the gilded royal cognizance and initials, the queen pushed it open with her own hand, and, followed by her companions, entered the apartment beyond. It was an oblong chamber, sparsely lighted at its further end by a

couple of tall windows, in whose deep recesses some half-dozen lackeys were yawningly watching what might be going on in the courtyard below. At sight, however, of the queen they hurried into rank, and proceeded to throw open with much ceremony another double door, which brought them into a room, or rather vestibule of circular form, panelled with looking-glass deeply sunken in heavy gilded scrollwork, and which reflected in ghastly distorted fashion the gaudy elephantine ugliness of the crimson silk and ormolu furniture of the latest French fashion, ranged formally round the windowless walls; for the light of heaven only found its way into this dreary apartment through the blue and orange-coloured panes of a skylight let into the centre of its painted domed roof.

Here the queen paused; and having with a gesture dismissed the lackeys, and desired her ladies to await her return, she passed on alone with Lawrence Lee into a long straight corridor, richly carpeted and lighted by bull's-eye windows of coloured glass not larger than those of a ship's cabin. The silence and tortuous ways of the place oppressed Lee's senses like a nightmare dream; and he began to think that a guide through its dim passages was not altogether a mere courtly superfluity, but rather a thing of absolute necessity. "I'd sooner undertake to be finding my way for the first time through our hornbeam maze at home than in and out of all these crinkum-crankums," thought he; "and if this be

your King Charles's merry court, give me the Nether Hall kitchen."

A silvery peal of merriment, that rippled like dancing water on the sonorous laughter of men's voices, dispelled Lee's too hastily formed conclusions. He glanced at the queen. Was it his fancy? or did a shadow momentarily darken the composure of her face as she lifted the gorgeously embroidered Indian silk hangings before which they now stood, and with a sign to Lee to keep close, stepped over the threshold of a low-ceiled but spacious chamber, whose wainscot of ebonized wood was enriched with paintings, and gilded carved reliefs of fruit and flowers entwining emblems of the chase. Here at all events was no lack of life; for the apartment was thronged with persons of both sexes, and all so engrossed in talk and merriment that they did not observe the entrance of the queen, until it was marked by the quick glance of one pair of eyes, which all the others had a trick of following, despite their seeming carelessness. The expression in the face of the owner of these eyes, who was seated near the fire which burned upon the hearth curiously built into one of the corners of the room, soon brought to their senses the merry company nearest the door; and, subsiding into a decorous gravity, they fell apart into a sort of double thickset hedgeway of feathers and furbelows reaching clear up to the stone-canopied fireplace, whose logs, burning brilliantly between the brazen dogs, cast their light upon the swarthy countenance of King

Charles the Second, where he sat leaning carelessly back in a tall carved elbow-chair, attired in a hunting suit of darkest olive velvet.

"Your majesty is astir betimes this morning," he said, rising a little hurriedly, and addressing the queen in tones which were not wanting in courtesy, if they might be in cordiality. "You have been to church?" he added, glancing at the little book in her hand.

The queen bowed her head. "'Tis the feast of my patron saint, Catharine, your majesty will remember," she said.

"Odds fish!" ejaculated Charles, vexedly cudgelling his brows, for he had in no wise remembered; and a flush of something like compunction crossed his swarthy features. "You have our hearty wishes, Catharine, for its many happy returns."

A lightless smile curved the queen's lips as she acknowledged with a deep inclination of her head the chorus of voices endorsing this tardy felicitation.

"And now," continued Charles with a gesture of his hand towards the breakfast tables, glittering in their costly confusion, while his eyes travelled rather regretfully down over his long buff riding-boots, "does not your majesty propose to stay and breakfast with us? It is true—"

"That you have breakfasted," interrupted the queen with another faint smile. "Nay, I take it my absence will be more esteemed. Oh! no protests, gentlemen," she went on, lifting her hand as

the polite chorus was repeated, "for I perceive, as to be sure I only anticipated, that you are all booted and spurred for your day's pleasure. And I had no intention of coming here to—to spoil it. But on my way from chapel this young gentleman—" and she made a motion towards Lawrence Lee—"a supplicant for a word with your majesty, —crossed it. And though some of your majesty's people would have denied him, his business—"

"Business!" groaned the king, sinking down again into his chair with a cavernous yawn.

"Was urgent, he said."

"We have no leisure for it;" and Charles's black brows knitted with angry impatience. "Let him carry it to Whitehall."

"He says," persisted Catharine, "that it concerns your majesty personally."

"Then its standing over can give the less offence. If we alone are concerned—"

"We!" cried Lee, breaking to the front and sending all ceremony to the winds, and his bashfulness after it. "We! 'Tis there all the whole matter lies. 'Tis just because your majesty is 'We,' and never can be 'I.' The King is England, and England is the King!"

Charles's brow relaxed into an expression of amused curiosity at the earnestness of the speaker. "Your sentiments are loyal at all events," he said, as his dark eyes considered the young man's appearance from beneath their heavy lids. "Are we to feel assured that your heart is no traitor to them?"

Lee blushed. "'Tis my heart," he replied, "that bids me entreat your majesty to hear me."

"And a sweet heart I think it must be, by my faith, and your red cheeks," merrily laughed the king. "And a brave honest meaning one, I will not doubt. But we have seen too many shadows and mumbo-jumbos in our life, to be afraid of them. And," continued the king, glancing round at the company, all ready equipped for their expedition, "we are detaining these gentlemen, and the ladies too, from their pleasure."

"They could be spared," hopefully said Lee, who desired nothing better than to speak alone with the king.

"But it is suspicious indeed—this!" cried a beautiful Frenchified-looking lady, coming close up beside Charles, and darting angry glances on the young farmer from her brilliant eyes. "His majesty loves not so well tête-à-têtes with persons of your condition," she added in haughty tones.

"He might hold them with less honest folks, madam," returned the queen still more haughtily. "And he asks not your leave, I doubt, to speak with his own English-born subjects."

"Come, come!" said the king, as the lady at his side poutingly drew a step back; "this grows troublesome. What is the bottom of your business with us, my good friend?"

"Treason!" curtly answered Lawrence.

"Soho! And assassination to follow—eh? The old parrot screech," he went on, as Lee nodded.

"Some new plot to rid the world of our sacred presence. Is that it?"

"And of his Grace of York's, your majesty's august brother."

"Why, that of course," laughed Charles, casting a mischievous glance at a sombre-browed gentleman seated near his own chair; "for to a dead certainty no man in England would take my life to make thee king, James."

"Then," said the duke, accepting his brother's jest with a sullen smile, "if this young man is to be trusted—"

"Ay, ay, IF," chorused several of the impatient company. "There your grace hits the bull's-eye. IF."

"We are both doomed men," imperturbably concluded the duke. "And when," he added, addressing Lee, "is this to be?"

"Ten days hence. On your return from this place."

"Ods-fish! So they would take us red hot in our pleasures, would they? The scurvy crew! and where, prithee?" demanded Charles.

"Near by Hoddesdon. Over against the Rye House."

"The Rye House! Is not that how they call the ancient moated place that looks upon Master Izaak Walton's favourite old hostelry on the banks of the Lea?"

"The same, your majesty."

"And belongs, if we mistake not, to one Rum—Rum—"

"—bold. Richard Rumbold, a maltster."

"Ay; a prick-eared, Puritan-looking, malignant of a fellow, your majesty," interposed a twinkling-eyed gentleman, "who owns 'one daughter, passing fair,' as the dull old person does in the dull old play we all went to sleep over, a week or two since. Yes, yes; I remember her charming face well, and how the old curmudgeon came and dragged her in, sans cérémonie, from the little postern in the big red wall, where she was standing as pretty a framed picture as Lely or Sir Godfrey might make, to see your majesty's coach pass by. I' faith! I recall her well."

"And your memory on such points is a proverb, my Lord of Dorset," laughed the king; "but in truth I remember myself thinking the picture so exquisite, that I intended asking who she was of the good hostess of the King's Arms, one Mistress—Mistress—"

"Sheppard," prompted Lee.

"Ay, Sheppard, to be sure. A murrain befall me for forgetting the name of one who always professes such loyalty. Professes, friend," added the king in a significant tone.

"'Tis but the expression of what her heart feels," replied Lawrence warmly. "Mistress Sheppard is as loyal as the sign that hangs before her door. Though for Master Sheppard—h'm, well, 'tis no matter," and Lawrence came to a dead halt.

"We like not half-told tales, friend," sternly said the duke. "What of this fellow Sheppard?"

"Nothing, I assure you, sir—my lord—your highness," floundered Lee. "Nothing. He is a man of straw, a poor weathercock of a creature a lamb could not fear."

"Then whom the plague are we to fear?" demanded Charles testily.

"Not the old gentleman, I suppose, who fathers the pretty daughter, and hasn't a thought beyond her, and his rye-sacks, and his homily books, if his face goes for anything. Faith! 'twas as sour looking as if't had risen out of his own yeast tubs!" cried the earl.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the company, who made a point of always greeting the very smallest sally of my Lord of Dorset's wit with shouts of laughter.

"Not he, friend?" said the king, who had not failed to remark Lee's silence and slightly confused downcasting of the eyelids during Lord Dorset's speech. "By the by," he went on, still scanning the young man's face and figure with a sort of indolent curiosity, "what may be your name? All this time we have not heard that. Who may you be?"

"Lawrence Lee, of the Nether Hall Farm by Hoddesdon," answered Lee proudly. "My father served your majesty's father well. Though, 'tis possible, your majesty may not recall his name."

Short memory on such points, even when such services touched still closer home, and had been rendered to himself, was far from uncommon in Charles. Notwithstanding, his dark eyes kindled

genially as he continued to look at the young man, and the bantering smile grew softer. "And Nether Hall," he said, "neighbours the house of Master Rum—Rum—how the plague did the fellow come by such a heathenish name?"

"'Tis fortunate," said the irrepressible Earl of Dorset, "that so fair a damsel as his daughter is scarce like to wear it to the end of her days."

"Nay," said the king, holding up a rebukeful finger at the earl, as he noted Lee's flushing cheek, and the ill-pleased gnawing of his nether lip; "that quite clearly concerns not our deciding; for here we have, it seems, a question of treason, and this pretty Mistress—Mistress—"

"Ruth," said Lee in a low tone; "Ruth is her Christian name."

"I' faith! and such a sweet one, too, that it covers all the sinning of her father's—"

Lee started. "I said not—"

"You interrupt," smiled the king; "'twould go hard indeed for us all if fair Mistress Ruth should prove traitress."

"Your majesty has not a loyaller heart in all your kingdom than Ruth Rumbold," said Lee, conquering down his agitation.

"Say you so?" merrily returned the king; "then with such fair ladies for our champions, how can we fear the blackest treason in all Hertforshire? Here we have valiant Mistress Sheppard on one side of the road, and the loyal Mistress of the Rye House on the other—"

"Nay, be serious, Charles," frowned the duke, out of all patience at his brother's levity.

"Pah! I cannot," as impatiently returned the king, taking as he spoke a pair of riding-gloves from the table, and beginning to draw them on. "These would-be scares sicken one. 'Tis like the shepherd crying wolf."

"And when the real one came at last—" began the duke.

"Ods-fish, man. For pity's sake, let us have no more of this," interrupted the king. "The lad means honestly enough, no doubt. But he has been picking up some ale-house tale, and got a nightmare of it, depend on't. Stay you, my dear brother, if you will, to hear it out. And hark you, when 'tis ended, don't forget to see the lad falls to and picks up a good breakfast for his melancholy entertainment of your grace. Do you propose to accompany us this morning, Catharine?" he continued, turning to the queen.

"If your majesty commands," she answered, in slow almost hesitating tones, and as if her thoughts were elsewhere engaged.

"Nay, not command, Catharine," said the king; "but we do not forget it is your patron saint's day," he added, in tones that conveyed also a strong intimation of his will; "and it is our pleasure."

"And that is mine," said the queen, too well content to hesitate longer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"DID YOU NOT KNOW?" SHE SAID.

LOWLY the gatehouse clock tolled out the hours succeeding Lawrence's departure. Terrible and solemn ones they were for Ruth, maintaining her solitary watch beside the secret panel where the wounded man lay, with eyes closed, and now breathing heavily, now catching feeble gasping breaths, so feeble that more than once Ruth thought life had left him.

She had done her best, poor Ruth, and like any Lady Bountiful of treble her years, had got out her little stock of salves and simples and old linen rag, and gently and tenderly dressed the gaping wound; but it was all of just as much and no more use than the endeavours of the skilfullest doctors would have been.

"I am past thy surgery, child," he said in feeble but distinct tones, when towards two o'clock he stirred a little and opened his eyes. "The knife did its work. But give me a drink—ay, a cordial if you have it in your store. So," and he eagerly drank the contents of the little cup which Ruth filled from a flask upon the table, and shoulder-

ing himself feebly on his right side, his eyes wandered wistfully round the shadowy chamber as if in search of something, and rested at last on a little table of carved oak, bearing materials for writing. "Bring it here," he said. "Yes, that is well," he went on, as Ruth, marking his wish, even before he had given it utterance, brought the table beside the panel and set it close within his reach. "For I have a message to leave behind me, and my hours are numbered. My minutes belike," and his eyes closed; but in a few seconds he opened them again, and stretched out a trembling hand. "Quick!" he went on. "Pen and paper, dear child, as thou'rt a God-fearing maiden, and hop'st for heaven at last."

"As you do," gently murmured Ruth, spreading the paper as well as she could out upon the narrow bed, and placing the pen in his hand. "As you do, dear Master Goodenough."

"Nay," moaned the dying man. "Sin lies heavy on my soul."

"But God is love, dear Master Goodenough," said Ruth, dashing aside the tears that blurred her sight.

"Who taught thee thy creed?" said the sheriff, wonderingly fixing his hollow eyes on her pitying face. "'Tis none of the master's of this house, for his is a gospel of wrath, and of vengeance for our ill deeds."

"'I will have mercy and not sacrifice.' Does not the Bible say that, Master Goodenough? and the Lord Christ, did not He say 'There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.'"

"I doubt," murmured the wounded man, "had I been thy pupil, I had not been in this plight now." Then he gazed down at the blank paper, and thoughtfully setting the pen to it, while Ruth knelt upon the floor beside him and held the lamp close, began to write. "'*I Thomas Goodenough, being now at the point of death*'—Thy lamp burns very dim, there is a mist about it," he went on, labouring at his self-imposed task, while Ruth trimmed the flame, and made it shine brightly enough, but it remained only a poor dim thing enough for the eyes that never on this world's sea or shore, would see the light again—"'*by the hand of the man, Richard Rumsey, who has thus now destroyed my body, as first he did my soul—*'"

"As first he strove to do that," amended Ruth, watching the words, as one by one the labouring tremulous fingers produced them.

"Take you the pen, and alter it then if you can write, for my hand will not reach to't," said Goodenough, "and may it be as you say, little one," he went on, a gleam of something like content breaking upon his pallid lips as Ruth took the pen, and neatly wrote in her little amendment between the crooked-back up-hill-and-down-dale lines. "'*As first he strove to ruin my soul, by—*' Nay, but write on, and I will sign—quick—'*by fair and reasonable seeming words; persuading me to enrol myself into the foul plot which hath been hatched for the making away of the persons of His Majesty, and of His Majesty's Brother,*

James, Duke of York; thereby.' Hast thou it all down? '*thereby,*'" continued Goodenough, as Ruth nodded, "'*to rid the country of the race of Stuarts; and to set up rulers of their own choosing.*'"

"Choosing," said Ruth as she wrote the last word.

"'*It now appeareth,*' went on Goodenough after a brief silence, '*by this night's work, that there has further been intended the compassing of the murder of the king, and of his brother, by these bloody-minded men*'—write on, child, quick, quick!" Ruth's hand trembled cruelly, and a huge drop of ink fell from her pen; but she wrote on: "'*by their waylaying of the coach in which the king shall return from Newmarket;*' where's the cup, child? give me another drink. Now, thy pen again—stay, my brain grows confused—ay, from Newmarket, '*upon the by-road which runs by the Rye House, over against Hoddesdon, and there stopping the coach by the overturning of a cart across the narrow way, to shoot the guards from the hedges, and so in cold blood to kill the king and his brother.*' Hast thou that all down in black and white?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, though in sober truth the characters glared fiery red from the fair white paper in her fevered eyes.

"'*And hereby,*' faltered on the dying man, '*I, with these my last perishing breaths do declare, that of the forty conspirers in this plot, I take not upon myself to single out the more guilty,*

and murderously disposed ones; save only that my own soul is innocent of all desire and intent to shed blood; and furthermore I do desire to state, that of those plotters who gathered this night to discuss the ways and means for His Majesty's death, the young man Lawrence—'"

"Lee; yes, yes, Lawrence Lee," rapidly wrote on Ruth. "I know, Master Goodenough."

"Thou dost? so much the better, the brave lad who would—who would—"

"Ay, who would have saved you from that fearful man if he could."

Goodenough nodded. "*Lawrence Lee was not one,*' and—and—" Goodenough's voice sank to a whisper, and his dim eyes closed. "I can say no more. I would have—liked to—tell—the noble turn he did me—and—how—thou, whoever thou art—"

Slower and slower, fainter and fainter, rose and fell the dying man's voice upon the silence; until suddenly his eyes opened, and fixing wistfully for a little while upon Ruth's face, wandered from it to the paper under her hand. "Set thy name to it," he said, "for—a living witness."

"'Tis well," he went on, when she had obeyed. "And now, give it me here again under my hand, and thy pen—and hold the light close, for it grows so dark—dark—nay, but I cannot see the place;" and his fast glazing eyes strayed helplessly over the paper.

"Here, dear Master Goodenough," said Ruth,

taking the cold hand and gently placing it aright, "here is where I have written my name."

He made a desperate but ineffectual effort to steady the pen on the spot she indicated. "I cannot do it," he said, as the quill dropped loosely in his numbed fingers; "and my mark must suffice. But 'twill serve—'twill serve. Set the paper close—closer;" and then with infinite labour he made the cross mark. "Ruth Rumbold!" he cried, as he moved his hand, and the full light of the lamp fell upon the clear, boldly-marked characters of her signature beneath. "This man —Richard Rumbold's—daughter!" and his eyes fixed upon her in a stare of mingled horror and pity.

She nodded her head slowly up and down. "Did you not know?" she said, meeting his gaze with sad, appealing looks—"did you not know he was my father?"

"Then Heaven help thee, poor child, and comfort thee, for thou hast need of it indeed, poor innocent!"

Then his voice fell away into uneasy inaudible murmurings. His eyes closed again, and presently he seemed to sleep. And so till dawn slowly began to silver the fresh young leaves about the ivy panes, and creep on into the room towards the dark recess, spreading itself gently on the white, still face of the dying man, and the hardly more life-like one of the watcher, there was silence. But just as the song of the birds trilled cheerily forth, he stirred slightly. "Art thou there?" he murmured, feebly stretching out his hand.

"I am here, dear Master Goodenough!" she said, kneeling beside him and covering the pale fingers in her gentle clasp.

"God bless thee, child!" and he drew her hand close towards his lips; "for thy sweet charity God bless—"

And in a smile of content the lips parted slightly, a low sigh broke from them, and Master Goodenough was dead.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LAWRENCE SLEEPS ON IT.

"NOW, Friend What-d'ye-call-'em, are you going to accept his majesty's polite invitation? or d'ye mean to stand staring all day like a stuck pig, at your brother-porker's pate here?"

The dig in the ribs accompanying these words, which were rendered bewilderingly indistinct by reason of the quantity of the toothsome edibles he referred to, filling the speaker's mouth, materially assisted Lee to catch something of their signification; and he started from the reverie into which he had fallen. "Your majesty—" he began, looking round with dazed, uneasy eyes, and staggering forward a pace or two.

"Ha! ha! ha! That's excellent!" broke out a laughing chorus. "Your majesty! Hear the fellow! Are his wits clean gone? I' faith, he looks something like it! Majesty forsooth! There's none of it here, friend; unless we're to be having you for a change. Come, Master Up-in-the-clouds, out with you! Was ever such insolence! Out with you! D'ye hear?"

It was the most doubtful question in the world whether he did. If so, it was, at all events, without a spark of comprehending; and Lawrence Lee continued to lie back, pale and more than half senseless, in the king's chair, whither he had staggered forward as he had uttered those last words, and with a twist and a reel, sunk among its crimson cushions.

"Nay," said another of the crowd of lackeys; "leave him alone. Let him bide a minute. I saw 'twas a comin' over him before the king had done speakin' to him. He went on gettin' whiter and whiter. Come, man, drink a drop o' this;" and he took a tall ruby-red Venice goblet of wine from the table and placed it to the young man's lips. "So; that's brave!" he went on in kindly tones, as Lawrence drank a little of the wine and roused up. "Finish it, man, and have another atop o't. One leg o' mutton drives down another. Oh! eh! but we don't take noes here. Drink, I tell 'ee;" and refilling the goblet, the well-meaning fellow forced Lawrence to drain it again, in spite of his efforts at resistance.

"Where's the king?—the king?" said Lawrence as consciousness all broke in upon him, and he sat up. "I must speak to him. I haven't told him half—"

"Then t'must wait!" cried another lackey, "for the king's gone."

"Gone!"

"Ay; ever so far by now. He wasn't going to stop here all day listening to your wild-goose

tales, I doubt. He's half-way across the heath by now, and all the lot after him."

"But the queen!"

"Ay; her too. Didn't you see them all go? Where had your eyes got to?"

"Gone a wool-gathering along of his wits!" laughed another.

And while their shouts of boisterous laughter made the old walls echo again, Lawrence pressed the palms of his hands on the top of his aching head and made an effort to recall all that had passed, and to solve the puzzle of the strange condition in which he found himself. Possibly the fact of neither food nor drink having passed his lips since a hasty meal snatched at the Nether Hall early dinner of the previous day, was accountable for much of it. Neither can long-fasting men ride a score and a half of miles and retain their wits in good working order; and strong wine, if it be a temporary remedy, is scarcely one to be recommended, as these noisy court lackeys seemed bent on doing. And when he refused the dainty food they hospitably pressed upon him with the savageness only those who have lost all desire for eating, from too long going without it, can ever be guilty of, they forced more wine upon him, challenging him with a toast he neither dared nor willed to refuse.

"The king! the king!" they cried, filling all round for themselves, and brimming the goblet in his hand. "Come, Master Stranger, we must see what metal you're made of. Drink a bumper to

the king's majesty, and no heeltaps. Here's confusion to all crop-eared knaves."

"Ay, ay!" shouted Lee, starting to his feet, and waving the goblet high over his head. "Confusion to all crop-eared knaves. And now a toast. A toast!"

"Silence! Oh, yes; oh, yes! Listen!" shrieked the noisy crew. "Fill high. His majesty the chairman proposes a toast."

"The queen. God bless her!" cried Lee, putting the glass to his lips and draining it to the last drop.

"Ho! ho! Ha! ha! Queen? Which queen?" cried the roysterers. "Which queen?—"

"Queen Ruth, to be sure!" shouted one, hooking his arm into Lawrence's as Lee rose from the chair. "She of the Rye House, you blockheads. Queen Ruth!"

The sound of her name steadied Lee's senses like the working of a charm. He straightened himself to his full height, and striking out right and left, sent the troublesome fellows stumbling and tripping pell-mell among the chairs and tables. Then with a parting fling of his empty glass at the one who had dared to make a jest of the dear name, he rushed from the room—on, on—by the now entirely deserted ante-chambers, headlong down the grand staircase, through pitch dark interminable passages, until he found himself standing spent and breathless in the open air, the cloudless blue sky above him, and his feet ankle-deep in a miry lane.

The place seemed to form a sort of thoroughfare to the back premises of the palace, whose walls skirted its length on one side, while the other was bounded by a tall privet-hedge. Between the ragged twigs he could discern the broad flat stretch of country beyond. On the left, some fifty yards off, stood the timbered plaster fronts of a row of street cottages, and a few paces to his right a high narrow iron gateway, flanked by a couple of moss-grown stone pillars surmounted respectively by the royal lion and unicorn. Through this gate's filigreed iron-work, at the end of a somewhat broad, gravel, yew-bordered path, Lee could see a podgy marble Cupid spouting water through a hunting-horn into a basin. Lured by the gentle plash of the water, he approached the gate and attempted to push it open. With a faint screech, as if of surprise at being disturbed, it yielded, and undeterred by its stone guardians, whose jaws seemed indeed to grin less in defiance of his intrusion, than in wonder and derision at his fancy for exploring the deserted place, Lee entered, and strolled towards the fountain. On its broad edge he seated himself, to the great confusion of the gold and silver fish moving about its weedy depths, and found that it formed the centre of a fair-sized garden, the path by which he had come being one of four, radiating off at equal distances between grass-plots, towards the lofty red brick boundary walls, gay now with the snowy blossom of espaliered fruit-trees.

Here and there white stone gods and goddesses

gleamed amidst the dark yew paths, and would have seemed to render the silence of the place still more intense, had it not been broken by the voices of the myriad insect creatures footing it merrily among the parterres, and the darting butterflies, while stout old bumble-bees hummed cogitatively as they gathered in their wealth, as if they were mentally reckoning the probable sum total of its returns; and all to the music of Sir Cuckoo, who had a vast deal to promise of the good time coming.

Well, well; and Lawrence Lee, rising from his seat on the fountain's brink, and strolling listlessly onward by the nearest path, heaved a prolonged and heart-vexed sigh, making all the while not too flattering comparisons between these careless denizens of the king's pleasaunce—the bees, of course, simply proving his case by their exceptional prudence—who troubled their feather-brains not one doit about to-morrow's storms, which were as likely as not—more likely than not, indeed, to fall; as you might see if you would but spare half an eye towards the south-eastward horizon—and the king himself. As to the idiotic, selfish, frivolous lot about him, they were beneath contempt, Lawrence considered. To compare them with the butterflies and gnats would be an insult—to the insects.

This stage of his meditations brought him so near to the foot of a flight of rustic wooden steps that he tripped upon the lowermost one; and looking upward, as he recovered his balance, he saw that

they wound up to some height, terminating at the entrance of a pavilion of octagon shape, built into the angle of the wall, and partly overhanging the road running beneath. For sheer lack of something better to wile away his enforced leisure—for to see the king again, by hook or by crook, Lawrence was determined—he ascended the steps, and found himself in a small eight-sided chamber. Its walls were studded with morsels of spar, bright-coloured shells, and bits of looking-glass disposed in various and eye-fatiguing geometrical devices, sparkling like Hassan's cave in the rays of sun, now beating fiercely through the two windows. One of these looked upon the road, the other, commanding a view of the rear of the palace, admitted light into the place; but in accordance with the rule of such pleasure-houses, no air, since they were "not made to open."

Nevertheless, a cool breeze rustled in through the doorless entrance; and Lawrence, wearied out, and still dizzy with the fumes of the wine which had been forced upon him, sank upon the part of the bench running round the wall which was nearest the inner window, and fell to a listless contemplation of the scene before him.

Ugly, or altogether unpicturesque it assuredly could not be called; but incongruous and disorderly it was, with its queer irregular mass of wall and roof, new and old, time stained and brand new, all flung together without apparent rhyme or reason, as if they might settle down as they could.

It was some time before Lawrence was able to

distinguish, amid such countless odd holes and corners, the door by which he had found his way into the open air; and longer still before, carrying his eye to the upper story, he discovered the row of little bull's-eye casements which lighted the corridor conducting to the king's apartments. That it ran to the rear of the palace he had some hazy sort of notion; since through one of those casements he had caught a glimpse of waving green beechen boughs, and had guessed at the possibility of a garden beyond, while not a single tree shaded the street front of the palace.

The last straw, eastern wiseacres say, breaks the camel's back; and it is possible that his toilsome little ascent to the pavilion, and the burning sunbeams pouring in through the glass on Lawrence's head bore their share in producing the drowsy sensations stealing so rapidly upon him, that all the scene before him dissolved as he looked, into one confusing haze. "'Tis like a dream," he murmured to himself, pressing the palms of both his hands on his throbbing temples, in a desperate effort to shake off their oppression. "A murrain on those rascals for drenching me with that stuff till I feel as if I was spinning in an Epping Fair merry-go-round. Like a dream—a bad dream"—and his head drooping lower and lower upon his arms outspread upon the broad window-seat, rested a dead weight there at last, and he fell asleep.

Heavily as one of the Seven Sleepers he slept on. Ten, eleven, mid-day came and went; and

still, as afternoon lengthened, and the shadows grew deep upon the grass, he stirred only to sink back again into the unrefreshing sleep of utter fatigue and exhaustion. Sultry as midsummer the sunbeams poured into the airless chamber, till its walls seemed sheeted in parti-coloured flame, which grew but the more dazzling as the time of parting drew on, and the gray evening mists began to spread over the low-lying fields.

High aloft in the greenish blue sky the young May moon rose and mingled her mild beams with the fiery westward glow, and still he slept on; but restlessly now, and muttering hurried but inarticulate words, as if he was dreaming uneasy dreams. How much longer he would have drowsed the precious hours away, it is hard to guess, had it not been for a sudden and deafening blare of French horns and all kinds of music, mingled with shouts of gay laughter and voices which broke just beneath the window, sending Lee to his feet with a start and a cry of terror. "Fire! Fire!" he shouted, staggering to the middle of the floor and gazing in wild distraction round the pavilion, while he gasped for breath in its stifling atmosphere. Could it be that he was dreaming still? Strange ugly visions of—Nay, now, but see what things are dreams! and what is it after all but the setting-sun blaze? And as Lee stumbled tremblingly back against the trellised doorway, greedily drinking in the cool evening air, his senses dawned upon him.

"Ay, ay," he said to himself, with a faint smile

of amusement at his own fancies, as he stretched his neck over the wall, just in time to obtain a glimpse of the brilliant cavalcade turning the street corner in a cloud of white dust, and caught the shouts of the little crowd collected to see the king pass. "Come back, has he? Yes, yes, God save him, with all my heart and soul—God save the king! But the question is, you see, good people. The question is—" and then Lawrence Lee came to a dead pause, and fell into a deep reverie. "How was he to be saved?" pondered on the young man, his brows knitting painfully. This happy-go-lucky Charles, who suspected no foul play, because he would persist in judging others by himself, despite all his harsh experiences, and thought no one capable of taking so much trouble as to contrive it. This good-natured gentleman, whose manner of speaking, far more than the words he spoke, had won Lawrence Lee's heart, as they were apt to win all who approached him. How—so the young man now asked himself, could he ever have been brought to nurse one traitorous thought towards him? Ay, now indeed he understood, as never he had before, his mother's glowing look, when with the proud tears glistening star-bright in her eyes, she would say: "Thy father died for his king, lad."

The last shout sank to silence. The birds' song ceased. The last ray of the sunset glory faded, and only the plash of the fountain broke the silence, and still Lawrence Lee stood leaning against the ivied wall so motionless, and his face

showing so white and fixed in the dazzling moonlight, that he might have been taken for one of the garden's statues; but at last, as eight o'clock struck in the town belfries, and far-off village church towers chimed it back, he stirred, and slowly descended the little rustic steps.

"Rest thee well, father," he murmured, reverently folding his hands as he went. "The world may blame me, and say what it lists. The king shall be saved, though my life should answer for it. Father—only let heaven count me worthy to be called thy son."

And so across the garden, and through the gate, still standing half open as he had left it, he passed on into the street.

CHAPTER XXV.

SUPPER AT THE SILVER LEOPARD.

"AH, all that I grant you; 'tis indeed a mockery of hospitality which moves a man to press his good things on his guest beyond his appetite; and the rascals were to blame—much to blame. But, my good Master Lee, you're absolutely no trencherman."

And as he spoke, Master Alworth laid a tempting cut from the huge sirloin before him upon Lawrence Lee's plate. "A strapping fellow of your inches," he went on, "should know better how to dispose of a glass, and to ply his knife and fork."

"Nay," answered Lee, toying with the implements in question till he seemed to be making grand havoc with the slice of beef. "But I have supped excellently," and he glanced in courteous admiration at the temptingly loaded table. "Such good things would almost charm a dead man."

"And 'tis almost what he looks," thought the goldsmith, as he secretly scanned Lee's colourless

face; colourless save where on either cheek two spots burned crimson red.

"Though I doubt dead men's eyes never shone like his," he mentally added. "What the mischief ails the lad?" but aloud he only replied in well-pleased tones: "They're wholesome enough; and to speak no treason, Master Lee, the king's own kitchen, at least here in Newmarket, boasts not such a hand as my old Margery's at turning a venison pasty; try a morsel of it. No? well then, drink, man, drink. There's no finer colouring for white cheeks like your's, than a glass of my old Tokay. What! you won't neither?" said his hospitable host with a shrug, as Lee drew the massive silver-gilt goblet smilingly but resolutely on one side. "I' faith! I like not sots and topers," he went on, as he filled his own glass to the brim, "and as worthy Warwickshire Will—Oh, no offence, young gentleman—out of date Master Shakspere may be, but mind you, he can frame as wise and witty a phrase when he pleases, as any of your Shadwells or Rochesters, or your long-winded Master Drydens either, and he says 'tis a shame for men to put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains.' But wine need be no man's enemy. It should rather be his trusty servant and helper. For wine, as another wise man hath it, is a good servant, though it be a tyrant master, just as fire—"

"Fire! Fire!" loudly echoed Lawrence, starting from the brown study into which he had fallen during his entertainer's disquisition.

"Why, bless the good fellow!" ejaculated the

goldsmith under his breath, as he leant back in his well-cushioned chair, and tipping together the points of his ten fingers, contemplated Lawrence through his half-closed eylids with no small curiosity. "'Tis but a cloud-brained lad after all; one would ha' guessed I'd flashed a musket-shot in his ear, to see him start."

"Ay," he added aloud, "I was but remarking that fire is a good servant, but a bad master, since 'tis easier to kindle a flame than to put it out. But come, tell me now. How did your suit prosper to-day with his majesty? Though in truth what its nature was I know not; nor desire to be inquisitive," he added good-humouredly, as he perceived that Lee showed little willingness to enlighten him. "But you succeeded in it?"

"No—yes, no—that is, I saw the king."

"And spoke with him?"

"And spoke with him—Oh yes."

"And what think you of his majesty?" catechised on his host, just a thought drowsily. "A right debonair and gracious gentleman, is he not so?"

"Every inch a king," enthusiastically cried Lee.

"Oh ho! have I warmed the ice at last?" thought the goldsmith, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Why, so say I, Master Lawrence," he cordially rejoined. "And—come now, a challenge, you can't refuse—nay, i' faith! but you must drain it. I shall hold you a double-dyed traitor else indeed. Here's to King Charles," and reaching the

bottle over Lee's goblet, he filled it, unchecked this time, and rose to his feet. "God bless him, and confusion to his foes by land and sea."

"Confusion to his foes!" echoed Lawrence, rising too, and draining the cup to its dregs.

"And, since his majesty so well pleases you, what think you of his Newmarket palace?" continued Alworth, as both resumed their seats, manfully struggling to keep up the lagging ball of conversation, though, to own the truth, a long day over his ledgers, the dulness of his companion, who did not seem to be able to originate one single observation, and the supper he had eaten, were beginning to work more and more soporifically upon him.

"Palace!" cried Lee with sudden animation. "A rat-hole; just a rat-hole. Only fit to be smoked out!"

"Scarce big enough, truly, to swing a cat in," laughingly acquiesced Alworth. "'Tis a mean place, as you say, with its chimneys huddled away in corners and crannies, as if they were ashamed of themselves; and the house abutting, like any common one, upon the street, without any court or avenue to't."[1]

"I looked to find it built somewhere upon the course itself," said Lee.

"As it should ha' been," replied the goldsmith. "Upon the very carpet, as one might say, where the sports are celebrated. My own identical words to Mr. Samuel, the—the gods forgive us! —the architect. 'But,' says he, 'Master Alworth,

[1] *Evelyn's Diary.*

his majesty is bent on the purchase of this wretched old house.' And his majesty has a rare obstinate head-piece of his own, like the one they cut off his father's neck before him—heaven rest his soul! And so there's his fine house, and a mighty improper one too, in my poor judgment, for sport and pleasure, Mr. Samuel has made of it. Though, to give even him his due, you may go far before you find better turned arches than the supports of the cellars that run beneath the king's private apartments.

"Which lie to the back of the house, if I mistake not," said Lee.

"You do not. And cut off almost entirely from the rest of it, a perfect network of pillars, and arches beneath, that one might go losing one's self in, like any trapped mouse, if you didn't know the trick of them," added the goldsmith half absently, half as if amused by some suggested thought, and toying with an ancient-looking little twisted and chased bar of silver which hung upon the massive gold chain he wore round his neck. "Tho' that would scarcely be my case; for here I have an open Sesame, that, if I had a mind to't, would bring me straight into Hassan's Cave. In other words—"

"The king's own bed-chamber?" eagerly cried Lee.

"Why, you are quite right," said Alworth, looking up with wide open astonished eyes. Was this young farmer such a dull-pated clodpole after all? "Though how you should guess—"

"Oh! I have heard of such contrivances as

these subterranean ways," said Lawrence carelessly. "Where does it lead from?"

"Under your nose almost!" laughed Alworth, pointing to one of the large buttons, or bosses, carved on the intersections of the oaken framework of the wainscoting which lined the room.

"The dog's face?" asked Lee, carefully noting his glance.

"Nay, tis a sphinx's. And right well 'tis said she has guarded her secret for the three hundred years this house has been built."

"So long?"

"Ay. Just about the same time that the original foundations of what is now the king's palace were set. Some say that the lord of it, and my grandfather six or seven times removed, had dealings together in the black art,—but that is a way folks have of talking of honest traders when they happen to grow rich,—and that the two would meet together alone in the vaults at dead of night over their crucibles, to find out the secret of making gold."

"Was he of your craft, Master Alworth?" asked Lawrence.

"Ay; and a skilful master of it he must have been," said Alworth proudly, detaching the key from its chain and handing it to Lawrence for his inspection, "to have been able to cast such a pretty thing as this."

"And the lock it fits to," said Lawrence, taking the key and examining it curiously, "lies, you say, in the sphinx's throat yonder?"

The goldsmith nodded. "And the tale goes on to say," he added, "as I tell you, that they who push far enough along the passage, when they get to the bottom of the little staircase the panel opens upon, would find themselves in the room that is now the king's own bed-chamber. But I'd not care to be making the quest."

"Why not?"

"I' faith! 'tis possible, for one thing, his majesty might not care for the intrusion," laughed Alworth; "and for a greater reason, I've no fancy to be breaking my shins over broken-backed old stone floors and slimy steps, or running my head against these fine new stone posts of Master Samuel's, let them be never so mighty well turned. No; thank you for nothing!" continued Alworth with a sapient shake of his grizzled periwig. "I'm quite content to be in possession of the secret without putting my knowledge to the proof. And hark you, young gentleman," he went on more gravely, "if I've confided it to you, 'tis because—. Eh! eh! somehow I tripped upon it; but 'tis safe enough with you. You're not a man to betray secrets. You'll not put your knowledge to any ill use," he went on, as Lawrence made no reply, but bent his head lower and lower over the key. "'Twill go in at one ear and out at t'other, eh? By your leave," he went on, stretching out his hand for the key, which, however, Lawrence seemed in no hurry to give back, but sat dangling it in his fingers, lost, apparently, in deep thought.

"Ah, ha! I see how it is," laughed the gold-

smith; "you'd be for reading my sphinx's riddle, Master Harum-Scarum Christopher Columbus. But I'll have none o' that. Come, no tricks. Give it back. No tricks," continued Alworth, as Lawrence obeyed and gave up the precious key. "So, lie you there safe and snug," he went on, slipping the key on to the chain again, and putting it neatly into the breast of his coat,—"safe and snug, little friend. And as for you, Master Lee, if you'll take my advice you'll be getting between the sheets Marjory has spread for you in the Blue Room above stairs."

"Many thanks," replied Lawrence, shaking his head; "but that is not possible. I should be back at Nether Hall before mid-day to-morrow; and 'tis a longish journey. In an hour's time I ought to be upon the road."

"Tut, tut, man. Bed is the place for you to-night, and not a horse's saddle. Already your eyes shine like candles kindled at both ends. Six-and-thirty-hours it is, by your own showing, since you've closed 'em; and you know what Will of Warwick—and he speaks sound sense, mind you, does Will—of Warwick; as good as any of your modish Sedleys, and Shadwells, and—and—'sleep, sleep, Nature's'—how does it go? Why, to be sure—'Nature's soft—nurse.' Come, Master Lee, how goes it? You should know. By my faith, but you should. Ay—so it runs—'How have I frighted thee.' Marry, come up! What's next? 'That thou—no more shouldst weigh mine eyelids down'—and—and—"

But then, like a wise physician who puts faith

in his own prescription, Master Alworth's senses sank steeped in forgetfulness, his head drooped gently among the cushions, and a profound snore fell upon the silence.

Lawrence's face grew dark with vexation. Could anything be more tiresome and inopportune? The church clock struck eleven. A fearfully late hour for those good old times, when "early to bed, and early to rise" made everybody "so healthy, and wealthy, and wise."

"Master Alworth," said Lee gently, though he was biting his lip all the while with impatience. "Master Alworth, by your leave—I will bid you good-night."

A second and deeper snore was the response.

"And farewell," shouted Lee.

"Eyelids down; eyelids—down," murmured the sleeper.

"Nay, but begone I must," muttered Lawrence, starting up and pushing back his chair, while his eyes despairingly contemplated his slumbering host, until suddenly a light flashed into them. "Let's see what a shake will do," he went on to himself, approaching Alworth's chair, and suiting his action to his words with no gentle hand. It produced no effect beyond an angry snort of remonstrance from the sleeper, who turned in his chair only to settle more comfortably. "What is to be done?" ejaculated Lawrence, casting desperate glances towards the door, as if he intended making a run for it. "Another half hour—a quarter, even, and—"

Something which fell with a faint jingle and a clash to the floor at his feet, interrupted his speculations. He stooped to pick it up.

It was Master Alworth's gold chain, whose elaborate fastening had apparently missed touching home in his drowsy attempts to clasp it.

"Adieu, then," he said, placing the chain noiselessly beside his host's plate, and wafting him a kiss from his finger-tips; "for I must be taking French leave, if you will not be having an English one," and he turned to escape noiselessly from the room.

The first step he took, however, brought his foot down upon some small hard object. He picked it up. It was the key, which must have slipped from the goldsmith's chain when it glided from his neck to the cushions of the chair, and thence, as he had turned himself about, to the floor.

"Oh, ho!" laughed Lee, looking at the key as it lay in the palm of his hand; "you're a mighty slippery little customer!" and he was about to lay it with the chain, when he gave a start, and stood stock still, as if some sudden idea had mastered him; and still holding the key, he gazed from it towards the sphinx with thoughtful speculative eyes. Could it be that she was winking her heavy lids? Were her grim lips curving into a meaning smile until her very jaws seemed to be opening? or was it all only the shadowy flicker of the dying lamp? or perhaps a mere delusion of the young man's already highly excited brain.

Lawrence knew only that the half-mocking, half-goodnatured face beckoned him irresistibly.

One instant he stood hesitating. The next, he had seized the lamp, and with the key in his hand was on his knees before the panel.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"FIRE! FIRE!"

ILENT and dark as any city of the dead lies Newmarket under the starless sky. Not so much as a glimmer to be seen even about the palace, excepting from the mullioned lattices of the king's own bed-chamber.

Two hours since, Charles bade good-night to his courtiers, who, despite their best efforts to be entertaining, were yawning frightfully after their long day's pleasure; and then, retiring to his dressing-room, he dismissed also his drowsy valets, who, evidently for once in a way, seemed not indisposed to allow him to draw on his own night-cap instead of doing it for him, "for all the world," as he used to complain, as if he were "some poor Tyburn gallows-wretch."

Whether he was too tired for sleep, which is sometimes the case with people, or not tired enough, it was certain the king himself was in no mood for sleep; and wrapping his silken dressing-gown about him, and trimming the wick of the massive silver lamp upon the table with his own

august fingers, he drew it towards him, and stretching himself upon a couch, took up a book which lay tumbled face downwards among its cushions.

"A fair outside truly," he murmured half aloud to himself as he carelessly scanned its richly emblazoned velvet and gilt binding, and then proceeded as carelessly to turn its embossed pages; "and with such a mighty pretty dedication to my sacred majesty, that my poor privy-purse will suffer cruelly, I fear. Tho' I'll dare swear that 'tis all as full of emptiness, or at best of fulsome fawning flatteries, as my fine lords and ladies, who hang upon my skirts, and care no more for me than this little Médor here," and he gently caressed the satin soft ears of the little dog who had jumped to its favourite spot between himself and the downy cushions, "who loves me—for the cake and comfits I carry in my pocket. Nay, but I do thee an ill compliment after all, Médor; for though to be sure thou mightst not be at the pains to stretch out one of thy fringy paws here to help me in my need, at least thou'dst not turn against me, as some I wot of would, who have fed upon my bounty. But what have we here?" continued the king, turning on again at the pages of his book. "Nay, now, fie, fie, Master Poetaster! but is not your choice of mottoes here uncourtly, to say the least?

> "'For kings and mightiest potentates must die.
> For that's the end of human misery.'

"I' faith! and I doubt 'twould trouble you no

more than the rest of the herd, were I to die to-night, so long as your dedication money were safe to you. All—all alike, every man jack, and woman jill of you. 'The king is dead,' you'd cry, 'alack! alack!' though I doubt your breath might not reach to so much as that—'The king is dead—'"

"God save the king!"

"Who goes there?" cried the king, starting to his feet and flinging down the book. What voice was this, snatching, as it were from his lips the very words that were upon them, and in tones so deep and significant, from the darkest recesses of the dimly lighted chamber? "Who goes there?" he reiterated, peering hard into the obscurity, till at last his keen gaze caught the outlines of a figure enveloped in a black riding cloak.

"A friend," answered the voice in hurried tones.

Charles laughed bitterly. "Our foes in disguise call themselves that," he said. "Come forward—friend, into the lamplight here."

The intruder needed not to do so much in order to reveal his identity; for the words had not left the king's lips before a glare of light lit up the whole apartment, and revealed the face of Lawrence Lee. An exclamation of anger broke from Charles; and he darted a look of mingled suspicion and defiance on Lee.

"Ha! I thought as much, Master Talebearer," he cried; "and this is your vaunted loyalty—this is—"

"Fire! fire! your majesty," and Lee rushed forward with outspread arms. "Come quick! for God's sake, come! afterwards hang me—kill me—do as you will. But now—now—the palace is on fire, I say! and there's not an instant to lose."

"Fire?" cried the king, casting a rapid glance upward at the dazzling glare lighting up every object in the room, and hurrying towards the curtained entrance, only to stagger backward into Lee's arms, overcome with the smoke and flame bursting from the heavy drapery as he lifted it.

"No, no! great heavens! not that way!" shouted Lee. "Already the corridors have caught, and communication will be cut off. Come for your life;" and he dragged the half-breathless king across the room. "Here, by the private staircase!"

"What private staircase?" demanded Charles, reeling forward after Lee, with his hand to his mouth. "I tell thee, man," he went on, in tones of anger as well as of fear, "there is no private stair—"

"Come! come!" shouted his deliverer with a laugh of triumph which rang through the burning room, and he seized the king round the waist with both arms; "we are safe enough this way—as yet."

"The dog! the dog!" cried the king, struggling in Lee's embrace, and pointing towards poor Médor, whose piteous yelpings resounded from the couch.

"Ay, come, then," said Lawrence, turning, and catching up the little animal with one hand, he thrust it into his pocket. Then tightening his

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clutch upon the king, he dragged him to a square hole in the side of the wainscoted wall as yet untouched by the flames, and almost flung him down on his knees as with a vigorous push he thrust him through the aperture.

"What is the meaning of this, sirrah?" angrily demanded the king, as, after a maddening interval passed in stumbling and sliding through pitch darkness encircled by Lee's arms, he went round and round, down and down, as if in some hideous nightmare dream, till at last his feet were safely deposited on level ground, and his shoulders against a rough stone wall, which struck ice cold through his silken dressing-gown. "Say! what does it all mean?"

"Fire! fire! your majesty," was all Lawrence could find breath to articulate, as, reeling from the weight of his burden, he advanced towards a lamp whose rays sufficed dimly to reveal a low stone vaulted roof, supported by thick pillars, whose outlines loomed ghost-like through the obscurity. "The palace is on fire;" and catching up the lamp, and again seizing the king, this time, however, only by the arm and with a more gentle grip, he succeeded in dragging him a few paces farther.

"This way! this way—"

"No," said the king, wrenching himself free, and coming to a dead standstill with his back resolutely planted against the wall! "I'll go no farther; not a yard. 'Tis some plot," he added, casting suspicious looks round from Lee's face to the darkness visible, and then again to the eager

agitated countenance of the young man. "Some scurvy plot. Villain!" he cried, suddenly seizing Lawrence by the throat. "How many are there of you? Speak!"

It was only by something like a miracle, however, that Lee was still able to breathe. "Speak!" shouted the king, and his imperious tones echoed again and again through the vaulted place, till for the moment he might well have fancied that a host of conspirators were hidden away behind the pillared arches; but not a creature came to the rescue, and Charles's grip relaxed. "I cry your pardon," he said then, a little shamefacedly, and retaining his hold about Lee's shoulder more in kindness now than in anger. "Such doubts are unworthy. A miserable requital indeed for this good service you have shown me. Your face should be no traitor's. Nay, never blush. I thought this morning that 'twas as honest a one as I had seen for many a day, and should tell its own story."

"Yet even though my tongue helped it, your Majesty would not listen. Yet here as we stand," went on Lee, as Charles replied only by a shrug of his shoulders, "man to man, liege-man to his lord," and Lawrence fell on his knees at the king's feet, "I swear I spoke the truth. But it was to worse than deaf ears. All in vain—and so—and so—" his voice faltered.

"And so—Ods-fish, man!" cried Charles in bewildered astonishment at the agitation of Lee's face. "Don't be afraid. Speak out. And so?"

"I fired the palace."

"You!" cried the king, recoiling in horror.

"What else was to be done?" asked Lee, regaining his composure, and shrugging his shoulders in his turn! "We smoke out the fox's hole when we can't unearth him."

"To kill him after all, poor fellow," said the king, with a half smile, and a faint glimmer of the old suspicion in his dark eyes fixed on Lawrence, as though he was striving to penetrate to his inmost heart.

"Nay," bluntly answered the young man, "I have no wit for carrying on conceits of that kind, nor time for it neither. If I burnt out the fox, 'twas to save him from himself, and get him to make off out of harm's way."

"And what of the queen, and all my poor people?" cried the king, looking with troubled eyes along the way they had come. "A heavy ransom they are paying for my rescue. Let us get out of this place, and help, before every one of them is burned in bed."

"'Tis but little enough harm they'll come to, I'll warrant," said Lee, in cool tones, and detaining the king with a firm hand. "The fire had a mighty pretty effect," he continued, with pride, "a mighty pretty effect; and so do a man's frills and furbelows, though he hasn't a thread of shirt underneath to bless himself with; and 'twas just that and no more—a flash in the pan, a snap-dragon, that has but just burned up all your Majesty's little favourite odds and ends,

and rattle-traps, but I doubt it had not done a groat's worth of harm."

"That's reassuring," said the king dismally.

"Your Majesty may take my word for it," continued Lawrence. "I did but fire the wainscot of your chamber, as close as I could by the stone corridor, which I know cuts off all communication with the rest of the palace."

"But how did you know that?"

"One may learn a great deal—"

"By opening one's mouth, hey, and asking questions?"

"By keeping it shut, and listening," said Lawrence. "Your Majesty may trust me for minding what I was about, and that I risked no chance against that sweet lady's life, just for the sake of saving your Majesty's."

"Well, well," said Charles, feeling more and more satisfied that he might place confidence in his deliverer. "But I like not these extremes," he went on, shivering and dragging his thin Indian silk garment about him. "First, you frizzle me within an inch of my life, and then you freeze me to the marrow. How long is it your pleasure that we stop in this dreary cellar?"

"So please your Majesty's own pleasure, you might be sleeping in your own bed-chamber at Whitehall by this time to-morrow night? 'Twould be the best course I can advise."

"I might do worse, I doubt," shivered the king.

"But you must leave Newmarket unattended

and secretly. My horse stands at your Majesty's service."

"And a pretty figure I should cut upon him!" ruefully laughed the king, looking down at his airy attire. "To say nothing of my singed periwig here," and he passed his hand over the spot where the coal-black locks had been scorched and burnt.

"Your Majesty would in any case be safer for finding one of another colour to travel in; and if you'll but keep moving, I'll warrant that Master Alworth will help you to it, and all else you may need."

"Alworth! Richard Alworth!" cried Charles.

"Ay," said Lawrence. "Your Majesty, I take it, can trust him."

"With untold gold," warmly said the king—"with my crown jewels—"

"With yourself, then."

"Have with you, Master Lee;" and the last lingering doubt faded from his face. "Which way?"

"Up by this little staircase."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"IN THE NIGHT ALL CATS ARE GRAY."

THE after-supper nap indulged in by Master Alworth was no little affair of forty winks; and he would possibly have slept on till morning's light, had not the sound of countless tramping feet, and a deafening uproar of voices outside in the street, disturbed his repose.

"Hey day! morning already!" he grumbled, sitting up shiveringly, and cramped in every limb. "Ha! what's that?" he went on, blinking and rubbing his eyes, as a flare of red light broke across the green-tinted traceried lattice of the window looking into the High Street, and lit up the room clear as day. The next moment he was in utter darkness, for the lamp had disappeared. "Mercy alive, 'tmust be fire!" ejaculated the goldsmith, as another and another flash rose and fell; and aided by the fitful light, he groped, stumbling among the chairs to the window-seat, where he sank down staring horror-stricken at the showering sparks, as they fell on the heads of the crowd surging in the street, as far as his eyes could

reach. "What, where is it?" he gasped, dashing open a pane, and seizing the nearest gaper by the chin.

"The king's private apartments, so 'tis said," answered the man, shaking himself free, and rushing onward with the rest. "And the king! the king!" shrieked Alworth, in a frenzy of dismay as he turned from the window, and groping forward in the direction of the door, stumbled into a pair of strong supporting arms.

"Here, Master Alworth, safe and sound," said the unmistakable sonorous tones of Charles, as he set the trembling old man on his feet again. "Thanks to my young friend here."

"But how—how—" began Alworth, gasping like a stranded fish.

"The sphinx helped me, Master Alworth," said Lee, as he lighted a couple of waxen tapers which stood on the buffet, by the flame of the almost spent lamp. "But we'll talk about all that another time. Meanwhile there's a plot being hatched against the king's life; and if he stays here till folks from the palace yonder find him, and he be detained, and no doubt they are already in search of him, 'tis likely to go hard but his life runs in danger."

"What's to be done?" cried Alworth, gazing with scared eyes from Lee to the king. "What is to be done?" he went on, wringing his hands. "What can I do?"

"Lend him your coat, and the rest of it, and your hat, and spare him your periwig—Eh?"

added Lee, laying despoiling hands on the grizzled article in question. "So, by your leave, 'in the night all cats are gray.'"

"I would give my skin to save your Majesty," murmured the goldsmith, as he watched Lee tear off Charles's singed perruque, and assist him in fitting on the more venerable borrowed locks.

"Nay," laughed the king, "'tis not a flaying question, I trust, though it comes pretty near it, to be sure," he added, with a compassionate glance at Alworth's coatless bald-pated figure. "Here, Master Alworth, take this for pity's sake. Exchange is no robbery;" and tearing off his gorgeous robe de chambre, he flung it across the shoulders of Alworth, who, as he proudly drew the garment about him, produced an effect less beautiful than striking, and as much as possible like some Chinese idol with his smooth shining crown adorned by its tight little wisp of hair. "Your Majesty," he said, as Lee put his finishing touches to the king's rapid toilette, "looks charming—perfection!" he went on, clasping his hands. "The very double of myself. No one would ever take you for the—h'm—the sort of person you are."

"I look like a better man, I doubt," answered the king, turning to survey himself in a mirror. "And now, Master Lee, what next?"

"Stars and Garters," said Lee.

"Ods-fish, man!" cried Charles, opening his eyes. "Hadn't we best be leaving those alone? They'd be telling tales."

"Stars and Garters is the name of my mare," smiled Lee, "who is to carry your Majesty."

"To London?"

"Nay, not so far as that, only to the King's Arms by Hoddesdon Rye."

"What?" cried Charles, with a little start of surprise. "Into the lion's mouth?"

"And the unicorn's. Your Majesty will find no loyaler hearts than beat there, where danger most threatens you."

"I could get to London by another road; 'twould be better, even if it were ever such a circuitous one," said the king dubiously.

"'Twould be safer to take the road I propose," said Lee, "since it is the one by which I must return home; and I must have further speech with your Majesty."

"Is your horse a good one?"

"Her better is not to be found in your Majesty's stables. She'll prove worth the cost of her feed. I'll warrant your Majesty will be telling me that, when next we meet."

"At the King's Arms?"

"To-morrow afternoon; and there are those who will not be far behind your Majesty on the road."

And then Lee, kneeling at the king's feet, took his hand, and, kissing it, turned to go.

"Wait a bit," said Charles, detaining him; "what—who the mischief am I?"

"For the next eighteen hours you cannot be a better person than Master Alworth, called on sudden pressing business affairs to London."

"That's all very well," said the king, still rather perplexedly; "but I don't clearly comprehend—"

"Then your Majesty must pardon me for saying you are not Master Alworth."

"Well, well," laughed Charles, "'tis not the first time Charles Stuart has been driven to exercise his wits."

"And Stars and Garters," continued Lee, "will serve the King of England at his need every whit as well as ever Royal Oak did. In ten minutes she will be at the street corner."

And bidding a warm adieu to the goldsmith, Lawrence Lee hurried away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

AND so as the shadows fled away, and breaking day cast its pale gleams across the face of the dead conspirator, Ruth drew the panel back into its place; for down in the malting-yard she could hear the voices of the men getting to their work, and she turned away, making an effort to collect her thoughts.

It was no easy task; and she was still far from having achieved it when she was roused by the apparition of Maudlin Sweetapple's head through the tapestry.

"Marry come up! Dressed a'ready!" cried the old woman grumblingly. "We shall be havin' thee astir in the middle o' the night next! That comes o' the maaster sendin' o' thee off to bed at sundown, like he's bin so fond o' doin' o' late. Oh, ay! they may say what pleases 'em," continued Maudlin, searchingly scanning Ruth's face in the young yellow sunshine; "but I say it don't agree with thee, child. Thy cheeks are as white as turnips; an' thy face as gastered as if thou'dst bin

seein' of spirits. And—for the gracious power's sake!" she shrieked in terror as a rattling at the locks of the opposite door suddenly made itself audible, "what's that? Master Rumbold, as I'm a livin' soul! And me—"

The rest was lost in the privacy of her own apartment, into which Maudlin speedily withdrew her benightcapped head.

"I may come in, Ruth?" said the maltster, as he pushed open the door, and paused for an instant on its threshold for her reply, casting, as he did so, one swift keen glance round the room. "I was upon the drawbridge and saw you opening the window. Up and dressed earlier than usual; is it not so?"

"Is it, father?" said Ruth mechanically.

"Ay, is it, is it," he rejoined in impatient tones. "Have you and your pillow quarrelled, that you are so soon astir?" he went on. "Come, can you not answer me?"

"I could not sleep, father," faltered she.

"And why not, mistress?" he demanded with the uneasy twitch of his lips which sometimes did duty with him for a smile. "Were the rats more troublesome than usual? A plague on the vermin for eating my malt till I shall be ruined; and vexing thy rest."

But Ruth only shook her head.

"Why, what then?" he insisted. "Was perhaps the White Woman walking? Ah! for shame, child, on thy foolish fancies!"

"Alack! father, 'twas no fancy," answered she.

"It was no White Woman's spirit that haunted yonder room last night; but the black one of an evil, wicked-hearted man."

"Psha!" said Rumbold with an uneasy laugh. "Let us have done with riddles. I understand you now. You heard me and my boys—" He stopped with a confused, shamefaced smile. "That is what the foolish fellows, you know, love to call themselves. You heard, belike, I say, me and my friends—"

"Friends, father!" reproachfully interrupted she.

A deep flush suffused Rumbold's face, but his tones of assumed careless indifference changed. "How now, mistress?" he demanded with sternly knitted brows. "Was it needful to be craving your leave for them to pay a little visit to the Warder's Room to—to inspect its pictures, and—and—its old oak chest, and—and—what not?" rather lamely concluded Rumbold, darting at the same time a keen sideways glance at her. "But let me tell you, Ruth, I like not these would-be prying ways of yours. 'Tis fortunate that these walls"—and he glanced with infinite satisfaction round the solid-looking wainscot—"were not made in to-day's gimcrack fashion, for the entertainment of every eaves-dropper who pleases to be lending his idle ear to—to concerns that are too high for him. You did hear nothing?" he added with ill-concealed anxiety after a moment's pause.

"Father—dearest, do you love me?" was all her answer. "In truth, do you love me?"

"Ay, ay. What a strange girl you are, Ruth! I love you dearer than life, little one;" and he drew her towards him, and laid her head down gently on his breast. "Far, far dearer than life. But hark you," and then all the wistful tenderness died out of his voice, "that says not that I love your faults. Among which I find this prying, curious habit—that accursed inheritance of which our poor unhappy mother Eve has bequeathed her daughters so large a share of."

"But, father—dearest—"

"Ay. Then let me see thee thy father's child. Seek truth and righteousness as he has always done; and put off,—as some one put off certain mountebank pink petticoats we wot of—eh, little Ruth?—the pride of life, and the lust of the eye and the ear; for these are but part and parcel all of things that lead to the soul's destruction; feeding vain imagination and empty fancy—"

"Father! father!" interrupted Ruth, wildly, "I would it were fancy, or that my poor silly imagination were to blame. But 'tis truth and fact indeed. See here!" and dragging him before the panel, she pushed it open with hasty trembling hands. "See what these—friends of yours have done!"

"Sheriff Goodenough!" cried Rumbold, recoiling in horror-struck amazement! "Dead?"

"Murdered—look. There is blood upon his hands."

"Who has done this? Who?—"

"Colonel Rumsey."

"The villain!" muttered Rumbold, grinding his teeth. "I knew," he went on meditatively, knitting his brows, "that their hearts were not at peace with one another. How came we to be so ill-advised as to leave them alone together?—Yet to dream of its coming to this! And how—" Then he paused. What need to ask how she had come by her information? The broken panel explained all. "What brought it about?" he said after another silence. "They came to high words?"

Ruth nodded.

"Concerning?—"

"The murder of the king."

"Master Goodenough being opposed to it?"

"And Master Rumsey," nodded Ruth, "all for striking him down—unawares—like he has poor Master Goodenough himself."

"Ay," said Rumbold, "I guessed as much; though he breathed no word of it. I suspected it, I say, to be in his thoughts. Heaven forgive him! I think now, he would not have hesitated at putting poison in—a man's food, be he Charles Stuart, or any other—or stabbing him in his sleep, so only that he might gain his end."

"But you, father, you?" almost joyfully cried Ruth.

"Nay, we are not assassins. I and my—friends. And this scum of the earth, Richard Rumsey was not fit to consort with men of honour like us—we looked, Walcot and the rest of us, we looked indeed to be the slayers, if heaven blessed our

project, or the slain, and it saw fit. A fair fight, front to front—"

"Fair!" cried Ruth, "Fair? In that narrow by-way? Where the coach could not pass for the overturned cart!"

Rumbold frowned. "You have it all, seemingly, at your fingers' ends, mistress," he said, "and 'tis useless to dissemble with you; or to reason over nice and just distinctions with obstinate young maids' brains. Enough! See only that you make a discreet use of your indiscretion. Keep a silent tongue in your head. Do you hear me, mistress? Or by—"

"Father! father! kill me. Do with me what you will," cried Ruth, throwing herself at his feet. "By this time the king knows all!"

"Girl!" and in his fury he turned pale as the dead man beside him, and seized her by both wrists. "How? By what means? Who? This is Lawrence Lee's handiwork? Speak."

Her lips moved, but she made no answer.

"Betrayed!" he wailed forth in a paroxysm of impotent fury, "and brought to naught! Destroyed like any wind-bag. All our holy work—our sacred compact. By the machinations of a frivolous girl, and a love-sick Don Quixote of a boy! Oh, Ruth, Ruth! Little Ruth, was he indeed more to you than your father—and your very faith? Ay, but 'tis so—'tis so. What have you done? And is it nothing to you neither, that this brave night's work of your's must see me swing for it on Tyburn tree?"

"Father! father! No, no," shuddered Ruth. "There is time—time yet to escape."

"Ho! Is there so?" cried he with a grating bitter laugh. "I protest now, my daughter, you are really too tender and dutiful. Time is there? Time for me to play the poltroon's part, and make a byword and a scorn of myself while the world lasts! No, let them take me here. And yet—"

He paused, and his hold on Ruth's arms relaxed, so that she slowly fell away from him, while he stood sternly gazing into the chilly morning haze as though he saw in it some prophetic vision. "And yet," he murmured, "to be hunted down so. To let myself be trapped like vermin—when still I may be preserved, for an instrument to crush out the superstition and the tyranny of these evil days that darken more and more—"

"Father! father!" implored Ruth. "Quick! By the vaults. Before it is too late!"

"Yes," he went on, letting his keen glance drop on her for a moment, and then fixing it again like some prophetic seer, on empty space. "So it shall be. And my voice shall yet once more be uplifted to cry: Woe! woe! to the doers of wickedness in high places. Yes, I will live. I will live! I will stoop, even to the very dust beneath my feet—to conquer. I will live—and if every hair of my head were a man, I would venture them all in this quarrel."

Then he turned, and looked towards the door.

"Father!" cried Ruth, dashing aside the tangle of hair all fallen about her face, and clinging to him

with agonized clutch. "Father! one kiss—one word—one little word before you go!" But his face was turned stonily upon the door.

"Father!"

Then he was gone, leaving her stretched where at last he wrenched himself free of her clinging agonized hands, prone and senseless upon the threshold.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WELCOME HOME.

" AST three o' the clock, and a fine starlight night," piped the old watchman, as he shuffled along, bell and lantern in hand, down Newmarket High Street. "Past three o' the clock."

"Hullo! Master Diogenes. Have a care where you're running to," cried a deep good-humoured voice, as the old fellow came trundling full-tilt against the tall, broad-shouldered figure of a man dressed in gray, who was just about to vault on to the back of a fine black horse standing before the door of the Silver Leopard. "Are you looking for an honest man?"

"I've found him anyhow, Master Alworth," replied the old man, half lifting his lantern to the face of the speaker, which was shaded by a hat of gray felt, whose broad brim almost covered the long iron-gray locks of his periwig. "'Tis the early bird that catches the worm, they say," continued he. "But you be astir betimes indeed, Master Alworth."

"I've a longish journey before me,"

"Cambridge?" asked the old fellow.

"Nay. Farther by many a mile," answered the other, vaulting into the saddle.

"The powers alive! You don't say so! Well, you seem in mighty good trim for the task anyhow! 'Tis many a month,—years not to say—since I've noticed ye so springy-like about the knees, Master Alworth."

"H'm," said the traveller, passing his hand across the lower half of his face and then down his thighs. "But I must mind, or I shall be paying for my agility."

"Ay, ay. It don't do to be making too free when us is gettin' well on in our threescore, do it? But happen 'tis some good stroke o' business as is greasin' the wheels for ye," slyly laughed the old fellow. "Coin's a rare mender of a man's paces. 'Tis money—"

"Makes the mare to go," laughed the horseman. "Try the recipe yourself, friend," and he threw a crown-piece upon the ground.

Not without a half-suppressed exclamation of surprise at the goldsmith's unwonted liberality, albeit Master Alworth was no skinflint, the old man picked up the coin, and contemplated it with affectionate admiration. "I never see likenesses of old Rowley ever pleases me so well as these do," he said. "Eh, Master Alworth?"

"They're well enough," said the horseman, with a preoccupied shrug, as he stooped to adjust his stirrup.

"Tho', to be sure," continued the old man, "I

grant you 'tis mightily handsomer than ever Charles was, or is like to be. For 'tis few on us grows comelier as we gets on in the years. And there's no doubt this here picture makes the best of him. But there, 'tis part o' kings' trades to be flattered, 'tan't oftentimes as they stumble upon truth."

"Ods-fish!" laughed the other, "'tis seemingly a deal more likely to stumble upon them!"

"Ay—Past three o' the clock! and a fine starlight night—you may say that, for stumblin' 'tis, an no mistake, when you get no heed nor thanks neither for your pains. Maybe as you've heard—for the tale's in everybody's mouth by now—that there came one yesterday mornin' to the king, to warn him o' some fresh plottin's that's hatchin'. And what does Charles do, but turn on his heel, along with all his tag-rag an' bobtail o' lords an' ladies, an' leave the young gentleman to take care o' himself—Past three o' the clock, an' a starlight night—what d'ye think o' that?"

"I think 'twas mightily ill-bred of him," said the horseman.

"Well, pray Heaven the breedin' be the baddest part o't, and keep his majesty from any worse dangers than this night's," said the old man fervently.

"The fire, do you mean? But—'twas nothing after all?"

"Just a flash in the pan. An up-an'-ha'-done-wi't piece of business. Not so much, as far as I can make out, as a hair o' the tails o' one o' his little spannel dogs scorched."

"And the king?"

"He? oh ha!—near four o' the clock, an'—not to be found high nor low, so 'tis said. But what won't folks say? He knows where he is, depend upon't; 'tis not the first time as Charles has bin mislaid. He'll show up again, safe as the nose on your face. A cat with nine lives is old Rowley, God bless him!"

"Well, well, adieu, friend!"

"And a safe journey to your worship—Just four o' the clock, an' a bright sunshiny morning," called out the old man, trudging on and ringing his bell with such tremendous energy, as if to make up for any little delays, that it completely drowned the clatter of Stars and Garters' hoofs as she cantered over the cobble-stones of the High Street.

Meanwhile Lawrence Lee, only halting to snatch a meal by the way, and to give his horse half an hour's rest, reached Stanstead Church, just as the youngsters let loose from morning dame school were pranking among the gravestones, and plundering the hawthorn hedges. Tired out, but lighter of heart than he could remember for many a long day, he threw them a gay quip as he passed. Bang, clash, rattle, went the churchyard wicket, away all over the dusty road the poor may blossoms, scattered and trampled under ruthless little feet all trotting after the big horse's legs. And no marvel neither; for let alone the merry jokes of Master Lee, who always was the most popular creature in the world with the young fry

of the neighbourhood, there was a thing to be seen popping its head in and out of the deep pocket of his doublet in the most strange fashion. Head, forsooth! a bunch of brown satin ribbons you mean, or some fairing of the sort for Mistress Ruth Rumbold, that wobbled to and fro with the horse's movements.

"Naa, 'tes a dog, tell'ee," whispered a five-year-old wiseacre under his breath.

"Dog!" contemptuously laughed a wise virgin of six, whose canine circle of acquaintance was limited to huge farm mastiffs and gypsy curs. "'Tes a silk pincush'n for Madam Lee, cain't you see the brown and whoite bows to the corners o't."

"Pincush'n! bows! Thems its ears an' its oyes a gogglin'. Pincush'ns doesn't goggle their oyes; 'tes a dog, ain't it, Marster Lee?"

"Something of the sort," answered Lee, carefully drawing the little King Charles from his snug hiding-place, and exhibiting its roly-poly body to the public gaze; but the shrieks of delight greeting its appearance, so startled its unaccustomed ears, that terror got the better of Master Médor's courtly breeding, and sent him scuffling back into the recesses of his friend's riding-coat; and amidst a general groan at this disappointing manœuvre, Lee ambled on at a good round trot, which quickly brought him within sight of the grass-grown broken tower tops of Nether Hall. It was now close upon mid-day, and the sun shone hotly, so that the deserted look of the meadows where the haymakers had just

commenced work would have occasioned their young proprietor small surprise, even could his preoccupied mind have spared the matter a thought. Just a day it was for creeping away into the shade of the hedges, or of the alders overhanging the cool water shallows, to munch your rye-bread and bacon, and drink your draught of milk or small-beer out of your old tin can; and one or two old crippled men and women seemed the only folks in the way to give the master a welcome home.

Eager to relieve the anxiety he felt his long and unexpected absence must be causing his mother, Lawrence Lee had no eyes for the strange stares full of wonderment and suspicion the old gaffers and goodies threw after him; but he was startled out of himself as he reached the last field skirting the lane which led to the house, by a confused hubbub of voices and angry discussion, as if the whole parish had collected between its lofty hedgerows. The spot, ordinarily so peaceful and so silent, save for the singing of the birds in the big elm boughs overhead, was now a veritable Babel; and breaking through a gap in the hedge, fresh made by the trampling of a hundred hob-nailed shoes, he leaped the intervening ditch, and alighting in their very midst, demanded in imperative tones, what they did there?

For one instant, all stood as if confounded by his apparition. A thunderbolt fallen among them would have startled them less. Here had they been scouring the country pretty well since daybreak,

north, south, east, west, and all points of the compass between, among Epping glades, along Hainhault hedgerows, away over Amwell, Hoddesdon, Wideford, Ware, Waltham—far and wide, the hue and cry had gone. Deep into oozing ditches, and hollow tree trunks, and pigsties, and barns, and farmhouse cellars, and gable roofs, and canal barges, and river craft, pitchforks, and sticks, and cudgels of all sorts and sizes had prodded and poked in search of farmer Lawrence Lee.

"What is the meaning of this?" indignantly demanded Lee, as half a dozen strapping fellows clad in the local militia uniform broke through the crowd of smock-frocks, and closed round him. "Is this the way you do your duty, Master Sergeant?" he went on addressing that officer, who had seized his bridle-rein.

"Ay, it be, Master Cap'n," grinned the fellow—for Lee was the head of their company—"an' a moighty proper pretty way too. You be our prisoner!"

"Prisoner!"

"Oy, oy, it be all roight, ship-shape. You be arrested."

"On what charge?"

"That be no business o' yourn."

"The murder o' Sheriff Goodenough," shrieked an open-mouthed matron. "The murder o' Sheriff Goodenough, Master Innocence. Him as lies dead in the Warder's Room at Master Rumbold's?"

"By whose charge?" said Lee, passing his hand across his eyes, like a man striving to see the light.

"You want to be knowing more than's good for you," sneeringly replied the sergeant; "'tis all roight. Him as asks no questions, woan't be telled no lies. I warrant ya 't be no use kickin'. Eh—yow! yow! stand still, you brute," yelled the brave Hector, as Lawrence's horse evinced a decided disposition to make a trial of his heels, and sent the by-standers to a safer distance. Lee, however, quieted the animal, and then with a composure of manner that worked everybody up to an unendurable pitch of exasperation, he again demanded his accuser's name.

"Colonel Richard Rumsey," answered the spokesman, thinking it wiser perhaps to comply.

"Very good," said Lawrence dismounting, and consigning his horse to one of his own stablemen who stood near.

"Come! Quick march, cap'n," said the sergeant, regaining all his wonted valour, as the sound of the departing horse's hoofs grew fainter and fainter.

"Where to?" said Lawrence, facing about.

"The King's Arms, to begin with, and then—" the man chuckled.

"That will do," calmly said Lee. "What do you mean by this?" he added, a purple red flush of wounded pride suffusing all his face, as a stout cord was flung over his shoulders from behind, and a dozen hands secured it.

"Only a little compliment we pay to plotters and suchlike folk," laughed the sergeant.

Lawrence was about to make a violent resist-

ance; but suddenly his face changed, a look of deep humiliation came over it, and he stopped short. "Do I not deserve this?" he said to himself, and then he submitted quietly; and as if he were in his old position as leader of these men, and not the led one, he turned and faced about for the Rye; only delaying for a moment to charge some of the terror-stricken women-servants of the farm with a cheering message for his mother, and to bid them conceal the truth from her, as up till now they had contrived to do—"till he should return," as he said, regardless of the mocking gibes of the rabble, pressing upon all sides.

CHAPTER XXX.

A TRAVELLER FROM NEWMARKET.

"' IS a fair scene," said the king to himself, as between three and four o'clock in the afternoon he reached the rising ground which commanded the familiar prospect of the square battlemented roof and tall spiral chimney-shaft of the Rye House. "I think," he pondered on, "if I were not king of England, I would be a maltster, and live in such a corner of it, as this Master Rumbold does, without a care to fret me, and with one fair daughter, and my honest friend Farmer Lee for my nearest neighbour. But yonder," continued Charles, as his glance caught the gables of the King's Arms, "lies our rendezvous. Now, may my luck be as good as Master Isaak Walton's, and bring me as good a supper of fish out of yonder little silver stream, as he used to find under the old hostelry's roof. 'Tis quite certain at all events," he went on, smilingly to himself, as he caught sight of the buxom figure of Mistress Sheppard, who was standing at the porch expectantly, shading her eyes with her hand as she looked up

the road, "that this present hostess of the King's Arms, is as cleanly and handsome-looking as her predecessor could be; and as to her civility, if Master Lee's word is to be taken—"

"Bless the darling!" murmured Mistress Sheppard, making a profound curtsey to the king, as Stars and Garters stopped of her own sweet will before the porch, and neighed a greeting.

"Pretty creature!" she murmured on under her breath, hardly knowing whether the sight of her favourite, or of her favourite's rider, more originated the agreeable fluttering about her heart; for at the first glimpse she had recognized the king; and guessed at the consequent success of Lawrence Lee's mission. "Will your Majesty be pleased to dismount?" she said in low glad tones, as she laid her hand lightly on the mare's neck.

"Why, bless my soul!" ejaculated Sheppard, who now made his appearance in the porch, to receive the new-comer, and rubbing his eyes to stare at the horse. "Stars and Garters—as I'm alive!"

"You're not alive, man. You're asleep," laughed his wife, a trifle nervously, and placing her ample figure in such a position as to intercept his view of the horse, as it disappeared under the ostler's care in the direction of the stables. "Stars and Garters! What next, I wonder? 'Tis all Stars and Garters in thy sleepy eyes! Come, stir about man. Waken up, and take his Ma—take this good gentleman indoors, an' lay the table, while I see about somethin' for him to eat."

"Not forgetting a trout. Eh, Mistress?" called the guest after her.

"Ay. I'll warrant your—worship. A right royal one 'tis too," answered the beaming hostess.

"One would ha' guessed she'd bin' expectin' of him," muttered Sheppard, still rubbing the mystification out of his eyes, while he preceded his guest to the inn parlour, "and him a moighty sort of a favourite too. Now, there's a many that comes along, as she thinks naught o' puttin' off with chub; nasty fork-boned watery skelintons o' things. But my foine old gentleman here, must be havin' his trout, and his curtseys, and down bobbins into the bargain." And Master Sheppard, who, as luck would have it, had been a bit put about all day with one thing and another, having first rather sulkily flicked a few stray crumbs with his snow-white apron from the bright oaken table to the floor, proceeded to lay the cloth.

"Any news stirring in these parts?" asked the guest in careless tones, as he threw himself comfortably among the cushions of a settle drawn up in the deep bay of the window looking upon the road.

Now there was a good deal of news stirring; but Sheppard, contrary to his garrulous wont, seemed in no mood to impart it; and he only replied by a shrug of his lean shoulders, and a shake of the head, casting at the same time uneasy and sheepish glances towards a stout broad-shouldered man, seated in the embrasure of a distant window smoking an enormous Dutch pipe,

whose hat was drawn low down over his eyes, which were apparently absorbed in gloomy contemplation of the huge jack of ale on the table before him.

"Be you from nor'ards, Master Traveller?" said Sheppard to the new-comer, as if in haste to turn the current of conversation.

"Cambridge," answered the guest, craning his neck towards the window, as if he expected somebody.

"Eh! be you, now?" said Sheppard, rousing up a little, and a gleam of intelligence breaking into his eyes. "Then I doubt you can tell me if 'tis true that May Queen has beat Satan by ten paces, as the talk goes she has?"

"Quite true."

"An' what," gleefully nodded Sheppard, "what's your notions over Flatfoot?"

"Oh! safe to win."

"The king's own horse, an't he?"

The traveller nodded.

"Maybe as you've a score on her yourself?" said Sheppard with a knowing wink.

"Rather a heavy one. Yes," replied the traveller, suppressing a faint sigh.

"Well, well," consolingly said Sheppard. "An' you'll make a potful, depend upon't. Trust Old Rowley for tellin' good horseflesh from carrion."

"Ay. As he's able to tell honest subjects from crop-eared knaves," laughed the stranger, drawing close up to the table, and pouring out a bumper of ruby red wine from the tall silver-lipped flagon which Mistress Sheppard had just brought in, and

placed at his elbow. "Shall we drink his health, friend?" he added, brimming another glass, and pushing it toward Sheppard.

A more agonizing expression than the one breaking on Sheppard's face at this challenge, it would be impossible to conceive. Half-way his trembling fingers carried the goblet to his lips that quivered with strange contortions; then as his oblique stolen glances crossed those of the silent smoker, uplifted towards the shadows cast by the ivy half covering the lattice, his cheeks turned white as his apron, and he set down the glass untasted.

"Come man! what ails you?" said the stranger, looking up at the unhappy Sheppard, and then not without a touch of suspicion at the flagon. "Or is anything wrong with the wine?"

"No, no," gasped Sheppard, "it's very nice wine indeed;" and he gazed at the contents of his cup, with affectionate admiration. "Very nice. But I—I—I'm—ordered not—to—to—" Then he broke down hopelessly.

"Not to touch it, eh?" and laughing heartily at his host's perturbation, the stranger turned his attention to the trout which Mistress Sheppard was now setting before him with her own fair hands. "And who's your medical adviser?" he continued, as he made a deep incision into the gleaming armour of the fish. "I' faith! if 'tis yonder gentleman," and he gave a half glance towards the silent stranger, "I'd seek another opinion if I were you. What is this?" he went on, turning to inspect the contents of a little cruet-tray which Mistress Shep-

pard was handing to him. Verjuice and vinegar! Thanks, no. I'll have none of them. For though 'tis said they're good for the digestion, they always spoil mine," and he pushed away his plate, almost untasted, and his dark eyes wandered towards the silent guest. "What have you there?" he went on, as Sheppard with vast pomp and circumstance, placed on the table a large dish.

"Sirloin," answered Sheppard, flourishing off the silver cover, huge as Mambrino's helmet. "Sirloin —your worship," he reiterated obsequiously, as if he was anxious to patch up the appalling hole he had just now made in his manners. "Prime cut. Fit for a king."

"I'll have none of it. I cannot wait longer," said Charles, impatiently looking again towards the window. "I came here by appointment with a—friend, who does not appear disposed to be punctual. And yet, by his own tale, he lives not so far off from here. His name is—"

"Hush!" whispered Mistress Sheppard in his ear, as she bent to replace his plate with a clean one.

"H'm—No matter," went on Charles. "We—I am not accustomed to be kept waiting," and he rose, and took up his hat. "Tell the young gentleman when he does come, that he will find me at Whitehall—"

"Hush—sh!" again whispered Mistress Sheppard.

"H'm—not far from the water stairs. But he knows my address. So come, Master Landlord,

have with you, and find me a fresh horse. And pray be quick about it, for if I would sleep at home to-night, I must be brisk. I cry your pardon, Mistress Sheppard. You were about to speak?" he added in courteous tones, as he perceived his hostess smoothing her apron, and her lips opening and shutting, and opening again.

"So please you, there is one," answered Mistress Sheppard. "Nay, names matter little. One who earnestly desires an audience—a word with you, before you go. A young girl—"

"Let her come in," said Charles with animation.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUMSEY MEETS HIS MATCH.

"MISTRESS, your servant," said the king, his voice dropping to a gentle gravity, as the door opened, and disclosed the gray-clad figure of Ruth Rumbold. "What can we do for you?" he added, striving to conceal the curiosity he could not but feel at sight of the pale face, and the sad wearied look of the beautiful downcast eyes. "Or do you perhaps bring me the reckoning?" he went on, as, encouraged by his kindly tones, she tendered him a large folded paper which she carried in her hand, making a profound curtsey as she did so, at the same time lifting her eyes to his friendly gaze, so that he could read in them of the heart too full for words.

"Ods-fish, it must be something of a heavy one!" he added laughingly, as he turned the paper about, examining its seal; "but it bears no superscription, Mistress—Mistress—are you not Mistress Ruth Rumbold?" She curtseyed again, "It bears no superscription?" he reiterated, and hesitating to break open the seal.

"It is meant for your—your—"

"Worship," prompted Mistress Sheppard.

"Your worship's reading," said Ruth.

Then without more ado, Charles opened the paper.

"Why, what have we here?" he said, glancing over its contents with awakened curiosity. "'Tis made out in two hands! '*I, Thomas*'—who is it? '*Thomas Good*'—I' faith! 'tis less like handwriting, than as if a spider had dipped his legs in ink, and then danced a coranto on this fair white paper meadow. Pray had the gentleman his wits when he indited this?"

"Indeed, indeed," cried Ruth, "he had, but not his strength—your worship. He was dying."

"Oh, I crave your pardon," said the king, growing grave again, and dropping his gaze from Ruth's troubled face, to the paper; "'*being now at the point of death.*' Ay, ay, I see now, I should have read further, '*by the hand of the man Richard*'—what's that noise?" he went on, breaking off in his deciphering endeavours, as a distant chorus of yells and shouts and hideous cat-calls suddenly broke upon the drowsy afternoon silence. "Your neighbourhood," he added with an amused smile, as he turned to continue his task, "would appear to be less peaceful than it looks. '*The man Richard—*'"

"Maybe 'tis your friend come at last to keep his appointment," said the stranger, whose eyes had for many minutes past been fixed on Charles. "Better late than never, you know," he added, putting his

pipe back between his lips, which were curled into an ugly leer; and thrusting both hands into the pockets of his small clothes, he settled himself to watch the approach of a dense motley rabble enveloped in a cloud of dust, which suddenly broke with a renewed outburst of uproar, over the low wood garden-fence, trampling it under foot, till it lay scattered in all directions. On, on, tramp, tramp, surging to the very windows it came, amidst shrieks and whoops, and cries of "Shame! shame! give him a yard o' rope, fair play! God save the king!—The gallows tree's too good for him!"—Tramp, tramp, fell the heavy tread of hobnailed shoes, until the forest of pitchforks, cudgels, rusty firearms, spades, spuds, rakes, and every conceivable weapon and tool brandished aloft by the strange crew fell apart, and disclosed the cord-bound figure of Lawrence Lee.

"What!" cried the king, starting in amazement. "Master Lee?"

"And a right magnificent progress he appears to have made," said the stranger, with an insolent laugh, as he carefully laid aside his pipe and rose from his seat. "Ho! come, guards," he shouted through the open window; "bring in your prisoner;" and hustled forward along the broad passage, despite the proddings and fisticuffs dealt right and left by his guards, against whom Mistress Sheppard seconded her indignant protests, by the vigorous aid of her own hands and finger nails, Lee, deprived of all power of helping himself, stumbled head first into the presence of the king.

"What does this mean?" cried Charles, as Lee, maintaining a stout resistance, succeeded for a moment in elbowing off the worst of the press, and hurrying forward, dropped, breathless and spent, upon one knee at the king's feet.

"Your Majesty," he began.

"The king?!!" broke in one universal shout of amazement from all present, excepting from the lips of Mistress Sheppard and Ruth Rumbold, and then an awe-stricken silence fell.

"Tell me—" began the king.

"I can tell your Majesty but this," said Lee, his voice falling clear and resonant through the utter stillness, "that I have been arrested by the order of the man who stands there, Richard Rumsey; but on what charge, I wait for him to say."

"On the charge," said Rumsey, advancing from the shadows, like some savage beast from its lair, with an evil twitching of his lips, and a serpent-like glitter in his cold eyes, which, however, carefully eluded the gaze of all present—"the charge of the murder of Sheriff Goodenough."

"What?!" shouted Lee, bounding to his feet.

"Committed," calmly continued Rumsey, still looking into space, "in the Warder's Room of Master Rumbold's house yonder yesterday morning."

"Nay, that is false," broke in Ruth, "for it wanted almost ten minutes of midnight. The clock had not struck."

"Girl!" cried Rumsey starting, and turning upon her a face grown ghastly pale; but immediately

collecting himself he added, addressing the king, with a baleful smile upon his lips, "Let it be so, your M——. The young woman may be right. She is in Master Lee's confidence I doubt not; and he has whispered the gentle secret of his exploit to her. Ten minutes to midnight it might have been."

"Villain!" furiously burst forth Lee.

"And since he has imparted in sweet confidence to this—in sooth I think she just now said her name was—"

"Ruth Rumbold, yes," cried the girl in a loud ringing voice. "And 'tis you—you, Richard Rumsey, are the murderer of Sheriff Goodenough!"

"You are certainly mighty wise, little mistress," he rejoined with a spasmodic twitch of his pallid lips. "Your Majesty," he went on, turning jauntily to the king, and with a careless wave of his hand towards Lee, "can see how the land lies betwixt these two. And this brave young bloodsucker is indeed to be envied so fair a special pleader. But it won't do, my dear," he added, addressing Ruth in jeering tones. "'Tis too grave a matter."

"Ay, truly," said the bewildered Charles, again glancing over the paper in his hands. "Grave indeed!"

"Scoundrel! double-dyed villain!" exclaimed Lee, writhing in his cords, and glaring at Rumsey. "Is it not enough that already your soul is black with its guilt, but you must accuse another of your crime?"

"Words break no bones," coolly laughed Rumsey. "If ever now," he went on, pointing at Lee's bound hands, whose every vein stood out to bursting in his struggles to get free, "these inconvenient little knots should be loosed, you shall certainly be set to rant it at Drury Lane playhouse. You'd make Manager Betterton's fortune in a week. In the meantime," he added, turning to the king, "your Majesty sees before you the slayer of Thomas Goodenough."

"Ay, ay; he speaks truth at last!" cried Mistress Sheppard, and dashing forward, and squaring up to Rumsey, she shook her clenched fist in his face.

"Woman!" he snarled, retreating a step, and his ashen lips quivering apart, like a half-cowed hyena's.

"Oh! woman me as much as you please," she stormed on. "That don't frighten me much, I reckon. Yes, yes, woman I am, and Ruth here has told me all about it; and how the others being gone away—"

"Others?" wonderingly interrupted the king. "Gone away?"

"Ay, for sure. The other conspirators, your Majesty—being gone down into the vaults with Master Rumbold, to see the way they should escape by, if—when—" She hesitated a moment.

"Go on, my good woman. I understand," said the king, "when their purpose should be accomplished."

"And they left Master Goodenough, who had

fallen asleep in the window, alone with this Rumsey here; and Master Goodenough, who was not for—for your Majesty being murdered, but only for being made away with like, across the water—being presently wakened up, picked a quarrel with this fellow—that is, this fellow, who was all for hacking down your Majesty and his grace of York yonder in the lane, like any butcher's oxen, picked it with him, and—Come, Ruth, child;" and seizing Ruth by the arm, Mistress Sheppard dragged her forward. "Those were his words. Tell the king how those were his words."

"Lies!" hissed Rumsey through his livid lips. "Let her bring her witnesses. Just a string of lies!"

"Those are in thy foul mouth," retorted Mistress Sheppard. "Not in this gentle child's, who found courage, Heaven helping her, for the king's sake, to make herself certain of all your evil minds were hatchin'; and then spared not what was best and dearest to her, so only that the king should be apprised of your villainy. Oh, I trow they'll be well mated man an' wife," murmured on Mistress Sheppard, gazing with proud tears in her eager eyes, from Ruth to Lawrence Lee, "when please old Time's good leisure, he shall make her a trifle older."

"Keep to the point, dear Mistress Sheppard," said Lawrence, flushing a little.

"An' what am I doin', if I aren't keepin' to't?" demanded she. "Don't I say that she spared not even you, Lawrence Lee, to the perilsome journey

to Newmarket? and didn't you right willingly mind her biddin'? Oh, I'll warrant me, little Ruth has told me all; and who but me was't, that girthed Stars and Garters, not waitin' to untie—savin' your Majesty's sacred presence—to untie my nightcap, and bid ye God-speed, and sent ye both gallopin' off together?"

"This is a strange tale," said the king, as Mistress Sheppard paused for lack of breath.

"Ay, 'tis indeed," she went on, "and Mistress Ruth has eyes an' ears, an' uses 'em to better purpose than some folks I know"—and she threw a significant glance at her bewildered better half—"as can only stand gaffin' and gawmin' at a body. An' she used 'em to bestest purpose of all, that moment when she hided, poor lamb, inside o' yonder panel that looks into the Warder's Room, an' saw you, Richard Rumsey, commit your foul deed. And so for your witness, if you want one, why here she stands."

"Unbind this young man's arms," said the king.

Rumsey started forward with looks of well-feigned concern. "Is your Majesty mad?" he said protestingly. "'Tis indeed too venturesome—too foolhardy, if I may say so. This fellow—taken red-handed—"

"We are surety for his not running away," interrupted the king with a faint smile.

"Shall she tell more?" went on Mistress Sheppard, looking on with triumphant satisfaction, while the king's commands were being obeyed.

"Do you want to know how like the Lord's own blessed Bible Samaritan this child tended the poor bleeding sinful soul, an' strove to save his poor body; but Heaven would not have it so, an' called him to his account—"

"Does your Majesty," loftily broke in Rumsey, "accept the testimony of this ranting virago, and this puling girl, or the word of a soldier?"

"He can take it, or leave it," cried Mistress Sheppard, throwing all her court manners to the winds, "like pigs leave pearls for offal. The witness of living truth," she went on in slower and solemn tones, "and of loyal hearts, is no thing to be despised. But the testimony of the dead is mightier than the angel's last trumpet; and that looks his Majesty in the face;" and Mistress Sheppard pointed to the paper in the king's hands.

"It is enough," said Charles, gazing with emotion on the poor faint signature of the dying man's hand, and the somewhat tremulous but clerkly little characters beneath it. "Richard Goodenough being dead, yet speaketh. Arrest that traitor!" and he pointed to Rumsey.

Like a wild beast at bay, the guilty wretch glared round him. All chance of escape was worse than hopeless; and the guard which now left Lawrence Lee a free man, and hastened to surround their new prisoner, had apparently an easy task in securing him. Ere, however, they could touch him, he plunged his hand into his breast, and with a heavy, but lightning-quick sideways lurch, eluded the grasp of his captors, and break-

ing into a low rageful howl stumbled forward within a couple of paces of the king. "So then!" he cried with an imprecation, snatching his hidden hand from the bosom of his doublet.

Time only to see that it clutches some gleaming weapon which he turns with a savage thrust upon the king's breast,—time only for a moment of dumb stricken horror instantly broken by shrieks and cries mingling with the deafening report of a pistol, whose smoke as it clears in thin bluish vapour reveals Rumsey prostrate at the king's feet beneath the grip of Lawrence Lee, the fingers of the would-be regicide's right hand still grasping the pistol, whose muzzle points straight upward to the broad beam overhead, shattered and charred, and riddled with its discharged contents!

CHAPTER XXXII.

"So, bring us to our palace; where we'll show
What's yet behind, that's meet you all should know.—
Shakspere.

ONE bright June morning, a few weeks after the events recorded in this little chronicle, the large audience chamber of the palace of Whitehall is thronged with a brilliant company, in whose midst are seated King Charles and his Queen. With curious eager glances the fine lords and ladies jostle each other to obtain a closer view of the dark-eyed handsome young fellow, and the girl standing beside him, apparently some few years his junior, with whom their majesties are absorbed in conversation.

The young man's eyes, when he can spare them from the queen, turn admiringly on his companion, around whose slender neck, white as alabaster, except indeed where the saucy sun has just bestowed his touches of tan upon it—his majesty has just cast a chain of exquisitely wrought gold, from which hangs a double pendant, set with diamonds encircling the miniatures of himself and Queen Catharine. "'Tis a souvenir

of our regard and affection," the king is saying. "Requital for your noble service, gold nor diamonds cannot make. These gems are but poor shadows of truth and fealty like yours, fair Mistress Ruth."

He paused, he had been about to institute some worn-out comparison between the beautiful jewels and Ruth's eyes, but a look from the queen checked him, she saw those eyes were too brimful of tears for any trifling, and as they welled over, dropping fast upon the basket on her arm, she made an attempt to speak. "This—" she faltered, slowly drawing down the handles over her arms.

"Ay?" said the king graciously, as he looked with rather expectant eyes at the basket. Could it be a present of eggs or cream or such like, from the farm?

"Médor!" he exclaimed as he lifted the lid, and the snubby muzzle, and two velvet brown eyes of the little dog peered forth. "Poor Médor! Ods-fish! we had been near forgetting thee altogether!" Notwithstanding which piece of self-confessed royal shortcoming, the small creature bestowed a lick or two on his master's hands; though it was a trifle carelessly, and he set up a whine, and vigorous efforts to wriggle back into Ruth's arms.

"Your kindness in this instance has been very cruel, Mistress Ruth," smiled the king, as he let the little creature have its way. "You have given him such hospitable entertainment since he

and I parted company in the burning room at Newmarket, that now he is loth to be separated from you. Médor loves you."

Nothing could be more clear than that the dog's sentiments were fully reciprocated, judging from Ruth's caress, and the wistful look her eyes bestowed on the little creature.

"Not better than she loves Médor," said Lawrence.

"Say you so? Why then, 'twould be the breaking of two hearts to part them! A crime no conscience could endure," cried the king. "Say, fair Mistress, will you keep the little jackanapes for your own?"

Would she? Would she not? Well, as Maudlin always would have it, Ruth was a strange incomprehensible creature; and if pleasure shone in her face at the gift of that costly carkanet, what comparison did that bear to the content brightening it, as she clasped Médor her own, her very own, in her arms!

Benefits of a more substantial sort were conferred on Lawrence Lee; and the estate of Nether Hall was widened by many a broad acre, so that Farmer Lee came to be accounted one of the wealthiest landowners of the shire, and the marvel of it was, that few begrudged him this worldly good fortune; though it would be too much to say none envied his lot, when one fine morning a year or two later, old Stanstead Church bells rang a joyous peal, as he led his wife Ruth along the flower-strewn way to her new home.

Something, nay very much of the old content shines again, now at last in Ruth's face; though its placid light-hearted look is gone for ever, and the shadow of past griefs will linger on it, till, herself an aged woman, they will lay her to her rest, to wait the time when all shadows flee away.

Still, very bright and blessed was Ruth's future, with the love of Madam Lee, warm and deep as own mother's love could be; and the devotion of her husband, and the music of small voices that by and by began to ring about the old house, and the mysterious alleys of the hornbeam maze; but no happiness could ever efface for her the memory of her father's fate.

Stern and implacable, yielding only to the gentler side of his nature, to stifle it down again, he had deeply loved Ruth, and been loved by her with a child's heart-felt affection. Honest in his convictions, loyal to his leader the famous Argyle, bravely as he had lived, Richard Rumbold, maimed and tortured by his captors, died an ignominious death at the Market Cross at Edinburgh, two years after the exposure of the Rye House Plot.

Cruel as these tidings of his end were, it was rendered ten times crueller by the thought of all those noble hearts that perished for the cause which had exasperated more desperate, and less disciplined minds to devise the hideous lengths of bloodshed and assassination; bringing all alike to the scaffold; patriot and lofty spirits like Sydney

and Russel, grovelling, revengeful self-seekers like so many of the plotters. Few escaping with their lives, excepting such scum as those who turned king's evidence like Richard Rumsey, and bought their evil breath at the price of their old hand-in-glove comrades' death.

Upon all this, Ruth in the coming years would oftentimes sit and ponder. Ardent, unshaken little Stuart royalist as she remained to her latest day, and as Master Lawrence under her good guidance came to be, it is doubtful whether either was ever brought to declare with good Madam Lee, that "the king could do no wrong." That question, however, they left uncontested, and, content with trying to do as little of it as possible themselves, did so much good as to call down upon their heads in life and in death the blessings of all the country side.

The grandfather's part which the roll of time brought into request at Nether Hall, was excellently represented by good old bachelor Master Alworth, who was its frequent guest, and of the many tales he used to tell the little ones, they liked very much that one of the brave, dear, real grandfather who died fighting for the king on Worcester field.

Of old Maudlin, what more can be said than that she passed her uneventful later years in the snug ingle nook at Nether Hall, made much of by every member of the establishment.

Adam Lockit, being of another turn of mind, declined to forsake his quarters in the gatehouse.

New masters of the old mansion might come and they might go. Maltster or magnifico, peasant or peer, but monarch of his trophy-hung little domain he remained; bequeathing it, when at last he went the way of all flesh, with his well-seasoned tales of flood and field, and hobgoblinry, to Barnaby Diggles, who superadded in fair writing (an accomplishment, by the way, for which he was beholden to his old master's daughter), that tradition of his own times, of the famous plot and conspiracy against his gracious majesty King Charles the Second—known as the Rye House Plot—and whose valuable assistance towards the putting together of this present record, it well behoves this chronicler gratefully to recognize.

Need it be added that the substantial marks of the king's gratitude which were bestowed on the hostess of the King's Arms, entirely converted Master Sheppard to his wife's way of thinking? and they subsided into the happiest peacefullest pair you could find in Hertfordshire; but then Master Sheppard never again put his fingers in what his wife called "pies that weren't baked for his eatin';" and when sea-coal was wanted for the King's Arms' hearth-places, honest sea-coal it might be, but Mistress Sheppard took good care it should be conveyed overland in a proper decent wagon; and always stood by in person, to count the sacks, and to see to the bottom of them too.

As to oysters, she steadily set her face against the things, and refused ever again to admit the ghost of a shell of one inside her doors. "If chub

and barbel and trout—trout such as his sacred majesty King Charles, not to speak of the renowned Master Isaak Walton before him, had partaken of under her roof, was not good enough for common wayfarin' folks, why, let 'em go farther," she said, "an' fare worse."

Spiked atop of the spiral chimney of the gatehouse, there hung for many a year the ghastly decapitated head of one of the arch conspirators, but long ago it crumbled to nothingness, and no blot now mars the scene that is as goodly and fair as old England has to show. Side by side in sweet converse, like old friends, the two rivers still wander on amid the green pastures. Still round about, and in and out of the red battlemented walls, the rooks flit, and caw their never-ending chorus, and the tall trees wave their long arms day and night, and whisper to those who list to hear it, the story of the Old Rye House.

THE END.

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